

# The Occupation of New Carthage

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Summary: In late 2544 the Covenant seized New Carthage, subjugating the human population to the horrific reality of occupation, degradation and enslavement. Witness this unique and untenable situation from both sides of the conflict, as both the Covenant and humanity edge steadily closer towards a terrifying discovery that could change not just the course of the war, but history itself.

## 1. Prologue " Camp 77

**\*\*Authors Note: Hi Everyone. I've had the general plan for this story in my head for quite a while. There's a few part's in the general plot that conflict with some of the latest established canon, so before you start reading it I'm going to ask you to forget about everything you've read post Nyland's Ghosts of Onyx (Harvest, The Cole Protocol & the Kilo Five novels.)\*\***

**\*\*Please let me know what you think.\*\***

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><p><strong>Prologue " Camp 77<strong>

><strong><br>\*\*\*\*Location: Covenant occupied human colony New Carthage\*\*

**\*\*Date: 02 / 04 / 2545 (Human Military Calendar)\*\*\*\*Human 'Re-settlement' Facility 077\*\***

Facility 77 was a death camp. It shimmering energy barrier's stretched outwards for eternity, a fifteen meter high wall of deadly energy that trapped every living soul caught behind it. All humans who entered its cold embrace would die. Some, the weakest, would die quickly. Others would live a longer but still ultimately brief existence, worked to death in the hellish mines beneath the encampment.

Twenty thousand human prisoners lived inside the camp at any one time. Their lives were short and brutal affairs, and throughout the occupation no one had ever survived the camp's harsh lottery for over a month. Sangheili warriors stalked the prison camp, staging mass executions every few days to cull the camp's ever expanding population. From guard towers atop the towering energy pylon's which linked the crackling plasma barriers Kig-yar sniper's picked off stray humans at will with their powerful beam rifles.

Facility 77 may have been a new addition to New Carthage's infrastructure, but it was by no means an anomaly. Dozens of identically constructed facilities dotted the prime continent, and like spoilt children they gorged themselves on a never ending flow of human prisoners, bleeding the occupied cities white. Over the past week alone the death rates in every camp had quadrupled from all causes, and since the first days of the Covenant occupation of New Carthage six months previous, the colony's former population of ninety million had been cut in half.

\* \* \*

><p>The soft crunch of snow against the calm night stirred Anderson from his sleep. The barrack block was quite, the enslaved humans snatching the precious few hours of sleep the guards allowed them before dawn brought with it the next hellish day of life in the camp. A handful of prisoners shifted in the darkness. He could hear sobbing and somewhere in the room a prisoner was coughing violently. Human movement inside the camp at night time was punishable by death. The guards demonstrated that on numerous occasions and the perimeter snipers were always looking for movement inside the sealed huts.<p>

Anderson concentrated, doing his best to block out the distractions of the other humans as he listened to the silence outside. Again he heard the soft crunch of snow, heavy footsteps and the course hisses of alien voices. Something was going to happen this very night, he could feel it.

Easing himself from the stale cot Anderson crept towards the closest window, careful to keep his back to the wall. He was almost there when he all but stumbled over a hunched form stooped beneath the plain of alien glass. A small freckled boy no more then ten years of age scowled up at him, his pasty dreadfully thin face flashing upwards in the moon light.

"Alex!" Anderson mouthed, his brow furrowing in anger, "What are you doing?"

"There moving around out there" Alex whispered, his words barely audible in the silence.

"Get back" Anderson hissed, pointing towards the boy's empty cot, "If they catch you, there'll kill you!"

Anderson had been a prisoner of the camp for but a handful of days and Alex had arrived only the morning previous, yet in that short space of time both man and boy were intricately familiar with the harsh rule of the camp. Alex was young and reminded the former UNSC communications officer of his own child, long dead now. He'd sworn to do the best he could to keep the boy alive and safe from harm as long

as he could, even if that timeframe could now be measured in a matter of a few brutal days, or hours.

Alex opened his mouth, about to argue his right to stay further. The point was suddenly mute.

The doors to the dormitory smashed open, blasting the human occupants with the whipping winter chill of the blizzard outside. Prisoners stumbled from their cots, raising their hands as if in preparation for a search of the block. Anderson grasped Alex by the arm and navigated his way towards the growing knot of humans clustered about the stacked bunk beds preying the Covenant soldiers would not realize they had been out of their cots. Already between the jostle of shoulders, heads and stinging snowflakes from the outside he could pick out half a dozen towering silhouette's in the doorway, thickly set and at least two feet taller than a man. Elite's.

The aliens stormed into dormitory, rousing the remaining human prisoner's from their beds with guttural hisses and painful kicks. They spread out around the dormitory's edge, herding the humans into the centre as if they had been cattle. Alex glanced up to Anderson, the fear he was no doubt feeling plastered across his pale face. Their eyes locked, Anderson vehemently shaking his head whilst his hand tightened like a vice around the thin boys arm.

That very moment someone else tried what Alex had been about to do. A skeletally thin man made a break for the open door, and was gunned down in a hail of plasma fire. The humans screamed in terror, Anderson grasping hold of Alex's shoulder with his other hand and edging them backwards as the elites surged into the human crowd, dragging three more humans to the fore. Sobbing and pleading for their lives, the prisoners were lined up in front of the entrance and made to kneel. Three elite's formed up behind them, placed the sleek nozzles of their energy weapons to back of the prisoners heads and fired.

Anderson clasped his hand over Alex's eyes, fighting to keep the boy still through his sobs and tears as crimson blood and flesh splashed the barrack block's floor. One of the elites stepped over the bodies, thrusting a powerful arm out into the freezing night.

\_"Humane's, moove."\_

The order was by no means perfect english, but its meaning was unmistakable. The humans were herded out of their dorm-block, the whipping winds cutting through their thin garbs and into the soft skin beneath.

Anderson stumbled, painfully cutting his toe open on the uneven ground. Boots had long ago become an unheard of luxury in the camp, and like most of the other humans he and Alex were barefoot. Glancing over his shoulder he could see the elites were busily emptying the other dorm blocks beside their own, and together the shambling humans soon formed a pathetic miserable chain of humanity. Anderson watched as some fell to the ground. Those who were too slow to get back up to their feet were mercilessly beaten by the elites until they were left sprawled bloodied and broken on the snow. After the brutal execution no one attempted to run again.

Alex walked beside him, his small hand finding Anderson's and

grasping his palm tightly. He no longer had the strength to restrain the boy, and could only hope that for the good of both of them he didn't do anything stupid.

"The Vat's" Alex whispered suddenly, jostling to get a better look over the tightly packed prisoners, "There taking us to the Vat's?"

"No there not" Anderson whispered, his throat now sore in the cold, "The Vat's are the other side of the camp, there leading us round to the main square."

In truth the extermination vats were exactly where Anderson had expected them to end up the moment the door to their dormitory was kicked down. But he had not lied to Alex, they were being herded in the complete opposite direction. The fact that they were moving steadily away from certain death did little to lift his spirit. He had taken careful note of their shepherd's, noting these were not their usual rank and file tormentor's. The camp guard elite's always wore dark blue armour while a handful, their officer cadre perhaps wore red. These elite's were clad in jet black armour, and the appearance of their equipment as a whole seemed more streamlined.

As the human column reached the main square, a parade ground at the edge of the camp where they would be lined up each morning Anderson glimpsed a convoy of parked Covenant hovercraft.

He pushed up on his toes biting down on the pain to get a better look. They were large vehicles, transports, enough for dozens, perhaps hundreds of prisoners.

"What do you see?" Alex asked tugging at his hand.

Anderson bit his lip, muttering a silent prayer.

"Just do what they say, and whatever happens, stay close to me."

\* \* \*

><p>Suka' Nakitee watched the human prisoners being herded towards the waiting Shadow and Spectre transports, her gloved claw like hands gripping her Plasma Repeater as she scanned the mass of huddled slaves for any sign of potential troublemakers.<p>

Her fourunit held watch over the main square between the slave pens and the camp's fortified gate whilst the rest of their lance shepherded the humans towards the waiting transport vehicles. At the first hint of resistance the four heavily armed and armoured Sangheili could cut the humans down before any of them even reached the camp's perimeter.

The tension between her unit could have been cut with a blade at that moment. It wasn't merely that a full lance of forty Special Operation's Sangheili had been deployed for mere guard duty, and human guard duty at that. Kalu' Texlusee and Zel' Tasolmee glared daggers at the passing humans, as if willing every single one of the shambling figures being herded into that very square to drop into the ever lasting flames of torment there and then. Of all of them Juha' Relusee, the fourunit's commanding officer was the only Sangheili who seemed to be even moderately relaxed as he stood beside her massaging

his neck, plasma rifle gripped ready at his hip. Now Nakitee thought about it, in her short time with the Special Operations warriors she had never seen Relusee moved to true anger, even on this Forerunner forsaken world.

"They must be for retaliation" Tasolmee mused, "another mass execution. If we're taking this many prisoners the humans must have taken out a full lance, or perhaps a priestess."

Relusee shook his head, "They wouldn't take them from here. The hostages would be selected from among the local population, greater chance of catching the perpetrators family amongst them."

"And they wouldn't have deployed a full lance of Special Operation warriors for something so mundane" Texlusee seethed, clicking her lower mandibles in evident distaste, "The Jiralhanae, god's even the terrestrial's could handle simple human relocation."

Nakitee inhaled sharply, clenching her mandibles as she did her best to ignore the slight. She knew her new unit was still morning the loss of a fallen brother. For the time being they could only ever see her as an inadequate replacement for one who had likely been as dear to them as a blood kin.

"Their destination is not the execution square" Relusee concluded after a moment's thought, "Though whatever it is the Field Master's have planned for them. They will not doubt soon wish that it was."

They watched impassively as the Special Operations Sangheili began to roughly herd the human prisoners onto the waiting transports. The Shadow troop carrier's they were using were military models elongated along the centre by about a third. Nakitee recognized them from the open countryside of her birth world, though they were normally used to transport cattle.

A minor scuffle broke out among the humans. Nakitee blanched inwardly as she saw a Sangheili officer smack one of the humans youngling's to the ground before claspng the terrified child by its neck and hurtling it into one of the waiting transports. A few dozen rotations ago and such an act may have troubled her. Indeed Nakitee still knew of females back home who would have been moved to shock and even tears by the warrior's vicious act, and one of two of them have even tried to intervene on the child's behalf. Her time on this world had quickly quashed any such notions the young warrior had over such matters. A human was a human regardless of age.

From the edge of the square two Sangheili emerged into the midnight gloom. One she recognized as their section's commanding officer, Field Captain Orta' Ikorradee, and the otherâ€¦

"Forerunner's grace" Tasolmee murmured, "is that notâ€¦"

"Commander Taia' Korequee" Relusee answered.

Nakitee blinked, trying to connect the name to the myriad web of Sangheili officer's across the occupation force. She counted off her unit's immediate superiors and those of the neighbouring cohort's. She paused, counting back and trying to remember if she had missed one when the name suddenly clicked. High Commander Taia' Korequee,

the former Master of the military Academy on Sepheria Luminare, the current commander of all Special Operation unit's on Nu Carthage.

"This just got interesting" Tasolmee remarked, rocking back on his heels, "at least we're not the only ones to be freezing our hind's off this night."

The two Sangheili paused by the waiting transports, the other fourunit's beginning to fall in as they were ordered back. Nakitee strained to pick up what they were talking about, but even in the dead of night they were too far away for her to pick up anything. Seemingly at the command of a flick of the Commander's wrist Ikorrandee turned and strode back into the camp, the lance's third fourunit at his heels.

Korequee twisted on his heel and walked towards the centre of the square where the remaining fourunit's were beginning to form up. He paused by the gathered Sangheili, exchanging a few brief words with the officer's, and then he continued on, towards them.

Nakitee glanced nervously towards the rest of her fourunit, thankful for the full fitting combat mask that she hoped would hide the anxiety that must have been plastered over her face. Up close it was easy to see why Korequee was still awed by the lower ranks. A full head taller than the Sangheili around him except perhaps Tasolmee, he was a powerfully built warrior and despite being past his prime possessed a physique that would put a full a generation of younger warrior's to shame.

Korequee drew himself up before their fourunit, looking over each of the Sangheili warriors with his pearl black eyes. His gaze finally settled on Tasolmee. The towering male stood firm, hooves together and back straight.

"Fel' Tasolmee" Korequee mused, scratching at his lower mandibles, "You're still alive I see."

"Not for lack of trying on the human's part" Tasolmee replied in all the demeanour of a grizzled veteran addressing an old comrade rather than a direct superior.

Korequee chuckled softly and shook his head, "nor a few Jiralhanae I would imagine."

Tasolmee shrugged his huge shoulders, "Be the battlefield, the tavern or barracks I do not care where they come at me. As long as it brings no shame on my family or unit, then anyone, be they dumb brutes or nameless vermin are welcome to try."

"Spoken like a true swordsmen of old" Korequee mused before twisting his head back to the Tasolmee's comrades, "and what of my other neophyte's."

"Well enough" Relusee snapped, eyes forward as if he was staring down the lateral prongs of a plasma sword, "missing my bunk around now."

"And no doubt the female in it" Korequee replied, Tasolmee snorted in laughter, pretending he had something in his throat.

"And what of our Academy's highest ranked sharpshooter?" Korequee asked turning towards Texlusee.

"Wondering why in the middle of the night a full Special Operation's lance is performing a task the Legionnaire's could handle Excellency" Texlusee replied dryly, her voice devoid of even a hint of humour.

"Straight to the point with a knife" Korequee chuckled, "good to see you haven't changed. Unfortunately this is a question I cannot answer."

"Classified on penalty of torture, branding and death?" Tasolmee ventured.

"If only I knew Tasolmee" Korequee replied with a shrug, "If only I knew."

"You did not order this deployment?" Relusee asked. It was the only time Nakitee had sensed genuine surprise in his voice. A deep unease twisted inside her stomach suddenly.

Korequee spread his claws, his grey palms flat. "My orders are to lead the prisoner convoy to an undisclosed military base on the edge of the central plateau which despite be being here for almost a third quarterly cycle I had no idea even existed. Our orders bare the mark of the Provisional Governor, whether or not they come from the Prophet of Penance I cannot say."

"Do you think he's acting without the Hierarch's knowledge?" Tasolmee asked.

"He's a politician Tasolmee" Korequee laughed, clicking his neck with a sharp jolt, "the day they start working together is the day something's terribly wrong. Best stay out of politics, in these times you'll live longer. Now, changing tact."

He clasped his powerful claws together, then produced a data crystal from his waist and threw it towards Tasolmee who snapped it out of the air with starting swiftness.

"We're moving out and your unit is on point, Tasolmee you're driving."

"That's not a good idea" Relusee hissed, ignoring the murderous glare he knew his friend would be directing at him.

"I trust him" Korequee chortled softly, "Kilshree, Texlusee, go and check the route is loaded into the Spectre's neural matrix, best we move now before the humans freeze to death."

"We would be saving the plasma to kill them" Tasolmee replied as he and Texlusee strode off towards the waiting Spectre's, "One way or another."

"And do not get lost" Korequee called after them, "I want to be back a Central Command before sunrise."

With a shrug of his shoulders the Commander turned back towards them,

his eyes falling on Nakitee as if he had just seen her for the first time.

"And of course" he chimed, "I had almost forgotten. You are a full unit again, are you not?"

"Yes Excellency" Nakitee replied, her head still bowed in his presence.

"By the God's daughter look up" Korequee scolded, "I cannot be that ugly surely."

Nakitee raised her head, fighting to stifle a grin that pulled at her low mandibles.

"And how are you finding fourunit's latest replacement?" Korequee asked turning back towards Relusee.

"As acceptable a warrior as any who could have been selected" Relusee replied, neither praise nor condemnation detectable in his voice. "She may feel unwelcomed by some, but she is needed. Respectfully my Excellency, the Forerunners would be hard pressed to replace Kilshree."

Korequee nodded, his eyes sombre.

"And what of your own position Nakitee."

"I am honoured to be called upon to serve in the Special Operations Group" Nakitee replied, her voice soft yet firm, "I am not trying to substitute their loss Excellency."

Korequee sighed, clasping a strong claw like hand on Nakitee's shoulder, "Kilshree was a fine warrior my child. He was among the finest our Academy's on Sepheria Luminare ever produced, and he fell in service not just to the Covenant but to his kin, his brothers and sister beside him. Nothing lasts forever Nakitee, not Kilshree, not yourself or your comrades. Not even the human who killed him. He is at peace now, as we all will be one day. There is nothing to replace. Your comrades grieve for their fallen brother but make no mistake, they have accepted you as their sister by blood, as have I."

"Thank you Excellency" Nakitee replied, a boiling warmth rising from between her hearts.

Korequee nodded his head a fraction before twisting back towards the camp, "We will be moving out shortly, preferably before we are all thawed to the ground. I will rejoin you shortly, I must first go and step on the camp commandant's hooves."

With that he turned, striding back over the square and towards the waiting camp guards.

The last of the humans had trickled into the square now and were huddled beside the parked transports, waiting as each armoured Shadow was filled and sealed in turn. Nakitee scanned the milling crowd, wondering just what would become of the deplorable creatures. Her eyes settling on two scrawny human males, an adult and a small youngling.



Something nagged at the edge of her subconscious, drawing her eyes back to the two humans. Suka clenched her mandibles, looking them over once more and then the realization hit her.

"There" she hissed, thrusting a gloved claw like forefinger out towards the two humans.

"There among its kin. It's him!"

Relusee glanced towards her, tilting his head in a quizzical gesture

"You are sure, they all look alike. How can you tell?"

"I know it's him" she replied, "The human must have been scooped up in the last resettlement."

Relusee took her at her word, reaching up to the comm.'s bead in his helm,

"Commander, this is Relusee, we have verification on our target witness. Requesting orders?"

Nakitee waited silently, her claws tightening again around the powerful plasma repeater in her hands.

With a quick nod of his head Relusee acknowledged a command she couldn't hear before snapping up his rifle.

"Understood, moving to intercept target."

The two Sangheili approached the human prisoners, their weapons raised.

\* \* \*

><p><em>They've recognized me. How?<em>

The question screamed inside Anderson's mind as he slowly raised his hands, conscious that one wrong move could see a plasma round punching straight through his chest.

Two towering elites; heavily armoured and carrying viscous looking plasma weapons came straight at them, the thickly piled snow crunching hollowly under their hooves.

\_"Humane"\_ the leading elite hissed, \_"Sep Bakra."\_

Alex huddled closer beside him, doing his best to shield himself from the Covenant soldiers. The small boy was terrified.

\_How?\_ Anderson repeated in his mind, \_How can they now I'm resistance!\_

The first elite, an officer perhaps shouted again sweeping a claw like hand through the air.

Anderson bit his lips, "I'm sorry" he said "I can't understand you."

How long could he last?

How long would it take for them to break him?

Anderson eyed the distant plasma barriers, wondering if it would not be easier just to make a run for it and let them shoot him.

They couldn't torture a corpse, and he wouldn't betray his cell.

The elite moved forward suddenly, thumping his gloved palm into Anderson's chest.

\_"Backra!"\_

Anderson gasped as if winded, stumbling backwards. Tenuously he lost his grip on Alex's hand.

\_Back.\_

The second elite, of slightly slimmer build to the first, perhaps a female reached forward snatching Alex's arm in her long talon like fingers.

\_The boy\_ Anderson realized, \_There not after me. What could they want this Alex? He's just a child.\_

Alex glanced towards him imploring, his muscles tensing as if he was preparing to struggle.

Anderson shook his head. Neither of the humans had a choice.

"It's alright Alex" Anderson said, careful to keep his hands where the aliens could see them, "It'll be alright. Go with them and do whatever they ask you to. It'll be OK."

Alex stared at him, tears forming in his wide eyes. He didn't believe a word of it.

As if in reply the second elite, the female took hold of Alex's other shoulder twisting him back towards the rear of the square. Her companion kept his weapon firmly trained on Anderson, the warning unmistakable.

Intervene and you're dead!

Slowly the two elites made their way back towards their own vehicles, the female frogmarching Alex away from the other humans. Before Anderson could see where they were taking him another elite shoved him forward towards the waiting transport.

In no time at all it seemed the last of the humans were loaded into the final alien transport, Anderson almost tripping over the vehicles lip as he was bundled into its cargo hold. Like a great serpent devouring its prey the humans were enclosed in energy field before an armoured shutter sealed them in darkness.

\* \* \*

><p>The convoy departed the camp in the dead of night, the individual Shadow transport's and their escorting Spectre's filing out under the

watch of curious Kig-yar sniper's and Sangheili camp guards.<p>

Nakitee's fourunit had point, Tasolmee displaying his less than cautious approach to driving. Texlusee as their sharp shooter kept watch with the mounted plasma cannon while Nakitee and Relusee took the conjoined passenger compartments on either side of the vehicle, Nakitee's claw like hand grasping the safety latch whenever Tasolmee banked a corner without feeling the need to brake.

They settled into the long journey, the calm night their only companion. Nakitee shifted uncomfortably in her seat, scanning the embankment either side of the human laid asphalt for any sign of movement, ensuring her plasma repeater could be snapped up to her shoulder at a moments notice.

Facility 77 was on the very edge of main settlements central plateau, far outside the normal boundaries of the main human habitation centre's that had spread across this world. Attacks this far out by the indigenous human resistance forces were rare, but not entirely unheard off.

Nakitee kept one eye on the road and the other on the holo-chronometer on her wrist gauntlet. Unit's quickly melded into a half quarter, but there was still no sign of the military base that was their destination.

Stiffing a yawn at the back of her throat, Nakitee stretched the muscles in her back, trying to judge their position. They had to be far outside the central plateau by now, and they had seen no other contacts on the road since leaving the camp. That in itself was not uncommon, for any form of human motorized transport was forbidden, and a planet wide curfew had been in effect since the Covenant occupation first began. Any humans they encountered on the road would have been shot on site. But they had seen no other Covenant movement either, no patrols and no resupply convoys. The roads were utterly deserted..

At the passing of the second half-quarter, Nakitee was fighting a loosing battle to boredom induced fatigue. She struggled just to keep her eyes open.

Sudden movement on the road ahead snapped Nakitee back to attention. Tasolmee swore as he braked sharply, the convoy skimming to a halt behind them as half a dozen looming figures materialized on the road before them. Pure survival instinct took over the fourunit's actions, Texlusee swivelled the plasma cannon on its mount whilst Tasolmee opened the Spectre's side compartments. Nakitee and Relusee emerged slowly using the opened doors of the Spectre as cover, their weapons trained on the shadowy silhouettes. In the illumination cast by a dozen lancing beams from the convoy Nakitee got a clear glimpse of their welcome party.

They were Sangheili.

Their fellow warriors offered no words of greeting, yet they kept their plasma weapons pointed towards the ground. One of the mysterious warriors stepped forwards and gestured towards the embankment with a wave of his arm. Up close Nakitee could see the Sangheili wore the jet black armour and combat harness of the Special

Operation's warriors.

Seemingly in reply to his gesture, a section of trees and undergrowth which crowned the embankment vanished. In its place was a single dirt track which showed all the signs of having been cut through the woodlands very recently.

Optical Camouflage!

Not a single word was exchanged. Her plasma repeater still raised, Nakitee glanced back towards Relusee who gestured towards the Spectre. Their weapons still raised, they returned to their seats, Texlusee keeping them covered with the mounted plasma cannon.

Activating the vehicles energy core Tasolmee banked the Spectre into the entrance, the rest of the convoy taking his lead. Their wardens followed them in on foot, waiting until the last Shadow had entered before they reactivated the optical camouflage, the dirt track disappearing from the view of the road as if it had never existed.

Tasolmee edged the Spectre down the path with a restrained caution, his eyes scanning the dark undergrowth on either side of them. Eventually they came to a wide clearing dotted with towering energy pylons.

"Jamming towers" Texlusee commented from behind, "They've shielded this place from orbit."

At the far end of the clearing Nakitee could make out bunkers, bulbous plasma turrets pointed towards the sky and a series of fortified buildings. Already she could see armoured Sangheili warriors emerging from the compound, apparently belonging to same unit they had already encountered.

The convoy pulled to a halt just outside the complex, the Shadow's forming up beside each other in neat tidy ranks as the Special Operations troops dismounted from their vehicles. Nakitee emerged cautiously, the snow crumpling under her hooves as her fellow warriors formed a defensive cordon around the Shadow's, unsure just what was happening.

Taia' Korequee appeared behind their Spectre, seemingly from nowhere. Despite his considerable bulk Nakitee to her shame had not heard him approach.

"Keep the energy core lighted" Korequee said clasping Tasolmee shoulder in a huge claw like hand, "Be ready to move."

"Are they ours?" Tasolmee asked, his hand moving towards the plasma sword at his hip.

Korequee was silent a moment, his eyes surveying the compound. Tentatively he shook his head, "I could account for every Special Operations lance, cohort and brigade currently situated on this world. These are not our kin. Relusee, Nakitee, with me."

Standing tall and fully armed, the two warriors fell in behind their commander as he strode forward.

"Is the target witness secure?" Korequee asked without turning towards them.

"Yes Excellency" Relusee replied coarsely, "sedated and sealed in the Spectre's rear compartment. The human will remain that way until long after we return to Central Command."

"Very good" Korequee replied, his mandibles clenching tightly, "We'll deal with him come sunrise."

Already a small party of five had detached itself from those Sangheili guarding the compound and was making its way towards them. Four were warriors, armed and equipped almost identically to Nakitee's lance, yet curiously she noticed their armour bore no unit marking's, rank's or insignia.

The single remaining Sangheili was taller than the others and clothed in long flowing robes over ceremonial armour and helm. Nakitee recognized the symbol of the Vestal Sisterhood on the Sangheili's breast plate, her mandibles tightening as she realized just what had deployed their unit on behalf the Provisional Governor.

"High Priestess" Korequee concluded, validating Nakitee suspicion as he drew to a halt clasping his hands behind his back."

"Commander" the female replied, her accent clipped and pronounced which indicated connection to an ancient bloodline. "I must thank you for accommodating my request this night."

"Request?" Korequee mused, "Our orders came straight from the Provisional Governor Excellency."

The Priestess chuckled as she folded her arms, the warriors behind her waiting attentively,

"A mere formality Commander, to sweep aside unnecessary delay. You are well aware my position grants me such power."

"As is your right High Priestess, forgive my inquisition" Korequee replied, looking over her accompanying warriors. "Curious. It is well known your wealth is vast, though I was not aware the Vestal Sisterhood had subsidised and furnished its own private military."

The female cocked her head, her hands falling to her hips and for a moment Nakitee feared her Commander had gone one step to far. Rank, lineage nor reputation would be an adequate defence, as a High Priestess she could have had all their heads at the snap of her claws.

Thankfully the priestess seemed not to take offense at Korequee's prying. Subtly she gestured towards her warriors, "Private contractor's commander."

"Retired" added one of the Sangheili, "Fifteen Cycles as a ranger, and another Five within the Honour Guard."

"And handsomely compensated for their discretion" the female continued, "Discretion I must also ask from your warriors. Not a word

of what they have witnessed this night can be breathed to others. When they return home each will find a generous sum deposited in their military account, please make them aware that I will not tolerate an abuse of my trust."

"Their mandibles will be sealed" Korequee replied, "I will make sure of it."

The female nodded in acknowledgement, clasping her gauntleted hands together, "My warriors shall take ownership of the human cargo. Your service tonight is almost ended."

Without acknowledging any direct command, two dozen of the Priestess's 'private contractors' swarmed out towards the waiting Shadows. The Special Operation's troops bristled, looking towards their commander for orders but Korequee waived them down. They did not like to surrender their charges to those they did not know, even if said charges were simple vermin. The Priestess's warriors unloaded the humans with a military precision even Korequee would have been proud of, herding the prisoners back towards the compound in a tight shambling file.

"Will my warriors be called upon for their, discretion again Ikarshree?"

Ikarshree!

Nakitee memorized the name, trying to place it with the Priestess's she knew were involved with the occupation. None came to mind.

The Priestess whose name was Ikarshree paused for a moment, considering the question.

"Perhaps" she conceded, "Many more deliveries may be required, and as I have already told you, they must be known only to those who partake. No reports, no words exchanged outside this compound, or punishment will be severe. Do you understand commander?"

"Intricately" Korequee confirmed, watching as the doomed humans prisoners disappeared inside the compound, "What will become of them?"

"Nothing you need be concerned over" Ikarshree cautioned, "After tonight, those humans will never be heard from or seen again. Your warriors are in no danger, my work here has the full sanction of the Prophet of Penance. Any subsequent blame will fall squarely on our shoulders Commander, your warriors discretion shall become their shield if necessary."

"Then I would advise an overshield" Korequee remarked.

Ikarshree chuckled again, "Point taken commander. Now I would suggest your warrior's return to their barracks, I've arranged leave to compensate the time lost from their bunks, discreetly off course."

Korequee nodded solemnly, clicking his mandibles in approval, "There is one other matter. It concerns our target witness, in respect to our special guest."

Nakitee saw the Priestess flinch at the words, her claws curling violently towards her palms for just a moment before she regained her calm composure.

"You have the human in custody?"

"Yes" Korequee replied, "But we cannot discuss such an issue here. You understand off course." There was a hint of smug reprisal in his voice.

Ikarshree paused for a moment, her interest clearly peaked, "Off course Commander" she conceded, "We shall discuss this very matter with him in the Central Spire tomorrow morning. Good day Commander."

With that the High Priestess turned and departed, her guards closing ranks behind her.

Korequee twisted on his heel, Nakitee and Relusee still standing to attention behind him.

"You're best assessment?"

"She's working against the High Council" Relusee answered, "I do not believe Penance nor the Provisional Governor truly understand the nature of her, work."

"Her warriors armour bore no markings or insignia" Nakitee added.

"Exactly" Korequee said, tapping his lower mandibles with a clawed forefinger, "No direct loyalties. The perfect asset for dirty secrets, easily deniable at a moment's notice and easily disposed off if such action is required."

"What should we do?" Relusee asked.

"For now" Korequee replied, "as she commanded. Return to your barrack's, sleep among your brothers and sister guard, and invest your loyalty in those you trust, watch those you do not."

\* \* \*

><p>Anderson fought against his fear as best he could, his nails digging unconsciously into the soft skin of his palms. Blood pooled from his clenched fists, dripping down his trouser leg and trickling through the toes of his bloodied feet.<p>

The humans were bracketed, freezing and half blind through the alien compound by the towering saurian like elites. Glancing upwards Anderson glimpsed the guard towers stretching high above the canopy roof, each tower furnished with three or four mounted plasma turrets and manned by no less than half a dozen elites. He had no doubt that they could cut the humans down at the first hint of trouble.

"Where are you taking us?" someone shouted.

If the alien's understood the human's language, they did not reply.

After an agonizingly long forced march, the humans were herded into an enclosed building, its walls providing at least a temporary respite from the howling winds.

Inside they were pushed into a long corridor with multiple sloped passages leading off a main thoroughfare. The humans were sectioned off, a platoon of elites forming a solid wedge across the entrance whilst their companions divided the humans into separate clusters. Anderson was grouped with three others, two men and a young woman. Two elites cordoned them off, herding the four humans towards one of the slopping passages as the other prisoners were driven towards their own cells.

Anderson and his fellow humans were pressed tightly together, the young woman sobbing into her hands.

"Why are you doing this to us?" shouted one of the men.

Again the elites did not respond, however one reached out to wall activating a holo-panel with a quick swish of his claw like hand. A door opened at the edge of the passageway and again Anderson and his little group were forced through, their escorts standing shoulder to shoulder behind them.

The chamber they found themselves in was almost pitch black, the only light coming from the slopped chamber they had just been forced through from.

"What are you going to do to us?" the woman screamed.

The elites raised their weapons, the woman stumbling backwards in fright. The two men surged forward but there was no need for the elites to fire, the doors sliding neatly closed before the humans could reach them and taking that last ray of light with them. Bloodied fists pounded against the smooth Covenant alloy which refused to give way to the terrified humans thumping against them.

"Did they just seal us in?" one of the men shouted.

The woman was still sobbing, her cries coming out in wracked tearful bawling.

"Listen to me" Anderson shouted grasping the woman shoulders, "Your Unharmd, I'm going to get us out of here OK. I'm going to get us all out of here."

In the pitch darkness Anderson was aware that the two men had rejoined them, the humans huddling together in abject terror.

"Listen!" the second man hissed.

"What is it" Anderson whispered, squeezing the woman's shoulder.

"Something's movingâ€¦"

His voice was cut off with a gurgling cry, hot blood splashing down



Anderson neck and face.

A cold metallic claw like iron talons slashed through his prison tunic and found purchase in the soft flesh beneath. Anderson cried out as he felt his skin break, struggling feebly before his unseen assailant hoisted him into the air and threw him across the room like a rag doll.

Anderson struck the ground hard, feeling the bones in his shoulder and cheek shatter as he tumbled head over heels. Somewhere behind him he could hear the woman screaming before the sound of ripping flesh and bone silenced her for ever.

"Let us out" the remaining prisoner screamed kicking and punching at the door, "let us out!"

Again the same tearing of flesh, a tragically human scream before the man whose name he did not know was torn from the world for ever.

His attacker was behind him. Anderson scrambled to his hands and knees, knowing the unseen assailant would be on him in a moment.

A great pressure forced itself down on his calf, driving Anderson back to the ground in agony. He screamed as he felt the thin muscles in his lower leg give way and snap as his attacker's weight arched him back upwards, the torment continuing.

The pressure on his ruined leg eased just a fraction before he felt the top half of his tunic ripped from his body. That cold almost metallic like hand curled about his collar bone, soliciting a gurgled cry from Anderson's throat.

"What do you want" he screamed through his bloodied lips.

There was just silence, a low hiss barely audible his assailants only reply. A moment past, a few seconds, Anderson dared believe he might live before he felt that searing pain plunging between his shoulder blades.

It was with a started detachment that Anderson watched a single blade of pulsing energy punch straight up through his chest, and as blood poured from his lips and darkness overcame him, he knew that he was dead.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Restricted Communiqué from Colonel Jane Parker to Office of Naval Intelligence Section 1 02 / 04 / 2545 (Human Military Calendar)\*\*

UNITED NATIONS SPACE COMMAND TRANSMISSION 117586-11

>ENCRYPTION: AMBER<br>PUBLIC KEY: FILE / PARIS-SPARDA-FALCON-THREE /

>FROM: COLONEL JANE PARKER, COMMANDING OFFICER IO RESEARCH BASE GAMMA II UNSC SERVICE NUMBER: 12852-15965-BQ

>TO: ADMIRAL STANFORTH, UNSC FLEET COMMAND,<br>REACH NAVAL HQ'S / UNSC SERVICE NUMBER: 00843-86573-GE

>SUBJECT: COVENANT MILITARY OCCUPATION OF NEW CARTHAGE<br>CLASSIFICATION: RESTRICTED (ONI SECURITY REGULATION)

Michael

I can only pray this reaches you, every other channel I've been slamming my head against for the past three days. You remember New Carthage? Third largest colony in the Alpha Khan cluster we lost in late 44, it wasn't glassed!

We'd suspected the Covenant of having established a long range supply point for their fleet within this sector since the beginning for 45, we found it. Bastard's have occupied New Carthage, probably had boots planet side ever since it fell but our recent probe's uncovered something else, there are still humans on the colony.

The Covenant have occupied every major city on the central plateau, and by every indication they've enslaved the population. We've identified dozens of concentration facilities based specifically around area's rich in mineral resources. There working the enslaved colonists to death in those camps and replenishing their workforce from the cities and countryside.

I know the fleet is stretched thin, and with the recent losses at Miridem and Tokyo III the resources for an offensive at any level are non-existent but we have to do something, there being exterminated Michael. By all records the infrastructure on New Carthage has collapsed, agriculture, medical service and basic water supply has ceased to exist, the Covenant aren't even trying to feed the colonists. New Carthage had a pre-war population of over ninety million; we estimate the death count to be over forty percent, probably higher and the Covenant aren't discriminating; children are being starved to death. As a mother I can't sit on this and do nothing.

It isn't just the impact on moral this will have if and when it gets out. Any action against the Covenant at New Carthage would have real-term strategic benefits. The colony was rich in selenium and technetium among other elements; we believe like us the Covenant use this in the servicing of their FTL drives. We know the Covenant are consolidating their battle groups beyond the frontier, looking for a beachhead before their final drive into the heart of UNSC space. I'm not privy to ONI's logistic engine's but any ensign now knows that push is going to come before the decade is out, at the end of 53 if were lucky. Sabotaging there supply lines at New Carthage would buy us months, even years before that offensive comes.

I'm not asking for an entire task force. A small well armed insertion team and a single prowler could slip onto New Carthage unnoticed and get the job done. I know the Spartan II's are likely requisitioned by the Admiralty all the way to Christmas year 9999 but even an ODST team would be acceptable. It may give those poor souls on the planet some reprieve and ensure the millions already lost haven't died in vain, please think about it.

UNSC Base Gamma, Io

Col Jane Parker

## **\*\*Chapter 1   " Homecoming\*\***

"\_The Terrestrial Legionnaire's were a development of the late Covenant military, founded during the most turbulent cycles of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Age of Doubt.\_

\_The Covenant Empire of this era had been immersed in a number of bloody conflicts across the Orion spiral arm for well over a generation. In the spinward regions of the empire the Covenant fleets were locked into a vicious and costly border war with the expansionist \_\_Pfhor Homogony, the dreaded raider fleets of the infamous Pfhor pirate states pushing ever closer to the Sangheili core worlds. As war raged across the spinward frontier Jiralhanae insurgents from Doisac to the \_\_Talakreche world's had simultaneously plunged the entire anti-spinward corridor into a sector wide rebellion against the ruling High Council.\_

\_The backbone of the Covenant Ground Forces during this period were the Interstellar Field Legions. Comprised of a battle hardened core of state funded professional Sangheili warriors and officers, the Field Legion's were augmented during wartime with auxiliary battalions of indentured warriors from the various Covenant client races. Despite their crack training and advanced technology, it is a simple (and brutal) reality of warfare that in a conflict spanning hundreds of systems and thousands of inhabited worlds, no volunteer army no matter how well disciplined or equipped can simultaneously protect every planet from the marauding armies of foreign states whilst combating the depravations of internal dissidents.\_

\_The Terrestrial Legion's were initially formed as a strategic reserve to support the Field Legions in times of planetary invasion or rebellion. Raised locally from Sangheili colonists, every able bodied male and female between the ages of 10   " 32 cycles was expected to serve for a minimum of five annual cycles. (For those human readers interested in the Covenant Ground Forces of this era, an annual cycle on Sangheilios is equal two standard human years on Earth. A ten year period of service for what effectively amounts to conscripted national service may seem unusually long however a Sangheili's standard life cycle is significantly greater than that of a human, with the average Sangheili living to over a hundred and fifty standard human years of age. The period of military service is therefore proportionate when taken into perspective.)\_

\_With the tactical flexibility that the Terrestrial Legion's offered, the combined Covenant military was able to regroup its beleaguered fleets and field armies before counterattacking in a series of centrally coordinated offensives. During the final cycles of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Age of Doubt the Covenant Empire inflicted a number of crushing defeats of the \_\_Pfhor fleets whilst the rebel worlds in the anti-spin corridor were gradually blockaded and stormed one by one. The Covenant Empire had weathered a time of great hardship and loss, and had emerged the stronger because of it.\_

\_The strategic value of the Terrestrial Legionnaire's was not to be overlooked by the Covenant leadership of future generations. Rather than being disbanded, the reserve legions were integrated into the existing Covenant Ground Forces. In the cycles that followed the Terrestrial Legionnaire's would increase their selection pool to the most far flung and isolated of Covenant colony world's and outposts, whilst the standard term of service would be reduced from five to

three standard cycles, with conscripts given the option to defer their service by a minimum of three cycles to allow for prior commitments. Most importantly the Terrestrial Legionnaire's would be deployed off world to serve alongside their contemporary kin in the Field Legions. In the coming cycles the Terrestrials would serve with distinction in the bloody Phfor & Xenotine rim wars, the latter Jiralhanae rebellions and off course the religiously motivated crusades against the distant and remote human enclaves on the edge of the spiral rim.\_

\_As an interesting side note, the Terrestrial Legionnaire's were one of the few military units to maintain gender segregation amongst its warriors, with each legionary formation from legionnaire to Field Master (or Mistress) being comprised entirely of either males or females. A contemporary throwback to the ancient Sangheili Space Forces, when a clan's lineage was as deemed as precious a resource as raw materials are to a sovereign state today (and the implications of an unplanned pregnancy legitimate precedent to war), the practice nonetheless created a unique identify amongst the Terrestrial legions.\_

\_In retrospect the original intention of the custom was rendered moot by the necessities of war. In the countless deployment zones, troop transports and active pacifications zones, legions were marshaled with little consideration to clan or gender loyalties, warriors mixed and inevitably unplanned compilations developed. Suffice to say pregnancy control implants soon became mandatory for every single female Terrestrial Legionnaire.\_

\_\*\*Exert from "Covenant Ground Forces of the Ages of \*\*\_\_\*\*Conversion  
â€" Reclamation\*\*\_\_\*\*" by Han' \*\*\_\_\*\*Fulsamee (Umbrella Military  
Publishing circa 2749)"\*\*\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Location: Covenant Colonized Sepherian  
System<strong>

\*\*Date: 02 / 01 / 2545 (Human Military Calendar)\*\*

\*\*90 Days prior to events of Prologue\*\*

The Covenant fleet breached slip-space on the very edge of the Sepherian system, three dozen lances of arching light piecing the dark void of space. Their rapid insertion trajectories curved them around the expansive debris fields that dotted the outer planets several thousands kilometre's anti-spinward from the system's capital world, Sepheria Luminare.

CCS-class battle cruisers, auxiliary carriers, escort destroyers and twice as many support ships. From their entry point the fleet was shielded by the planets sole gas giant and largest planetary body, a classic attack strategy. Aboard his antique yet still fully function Command Carrier, the Fleet Master split his forces, the sleek tear dropped vessel's skimming Koreshla's atmosphere like the ancient whales of Sangheilios's oceans of times past.

In the inner system, the capital world's automated defences were already coming to bear on the interloper's fleet, as drifting plasma mines and defensive weapon platforms in high orbit activated their

targeting systems. Colossal plasma cannons and mounted energy projectors built into the planet's orbital rings and artificial satellites swiftly targeted the approaching vessels as every single warship of the Covenant Armada on patrol in the system broke from their assigned routes to intercept the invaders. Over four hundred and fifty capital ships were pulled back to defend what many considered to be the most vital colony world in the Covenant's expansive empire.

Aboard the interloper's flagship, with a throaty chuckle and more than a few panicked glances from his underling's the Fleet Master conceded the old game to the system's masters. Passing a wiry claw like hand over his personal command pedestal the Sangheili warrior transmitted the encryption codes known to only a handful within the Covenant's ruling hierarchy, moments before honour, regulation and tradition would seen his fleet obliterated. In a fraction of a second the encryption codes were received, authenticated and verified. Sepheria Luminare extensive defences deactivated one by one as the approaching ships were re-classified from unknown contacts to allied ships of the Covenant Armada.

The Fleet Master was an aged specimen. He had served during the Age of Doubt, the pacification wars of the Jiralhanae and the early cycles of the Covenant Empire's crusades against the blasphemous humans. Relegated to a ceremonial role, he did so immensely enjoy keeping the system's commander's on their hooves.

\* \* \*

><p>The Sangheili passengers flocked into the expansive observation deck of the cruiser <em>Divine Judgement <em>in their hundreds as the fleet cleared the upper atmosphere of the bloated gas giant, coming into clear view of the shining sphere that was Sepheria Luminare.

Gathered amongst her sister legionnaire's Suka' Nakitee felt a chocking flood of emotions swelling inside of her. Joy, awe and perhaps even a tinge of fear, a sensation felt no doubt by many of her kin. Sepheria Luminare was the birth world of many aboard that observation deck, and none had seen it in over three full cycles.

As the fleet pushed forward into the inner system, Sepheria Luminare solidified into a more recognizable planetoid. Under the crystal white atmosphere Nakitee could pick out vast continents and polar ice caps separated by an interwoven seabed of shimmering aqua oceans. It was every bit the gleaming jewel Nakitee had remembered during the last few cycles she had spent cooped up inside her shielded barracks, or patrolling the swamp infested borderlands between the Jiralhanae hunting tribes of the scattered Talakreche worlds.

A sharp nudge beneath her ribs drew Nakitee's attention back to the observation deck where another Sangheili female of slightly shorter build and structure had emerged from the tight press to stand beside her. Like Nakitee the Sangheili wore simple robes over her black military bodyglove and combat harness. Her skin bore a touch deeper shade than many aboard the ship, not the colour of someone born under Sepheria Luminare's star but that of a warmer world.

"So this is the shining beacon of the Covenant Empire" Falshree mused folding her arms in mock theatrics, "The first colony, gateway to the

spinward worlds, mirror to the Holy Cityâ€|"

"Your point is taken Zera" Nakitee countered waving her friend to silence, "Now swallow it before someone plasma weld's your mandibles shut."

Zera' Falshree grinned widely at her companions retort, cocking her head as she glanced towards the quickly expanding colony world.

"For all the talk sister" Falshree persisted, "For all the weeping females that first tour amongst the Jiralhanae's equatorial cities, I expected something, more."

"To you perhaps sister" Nakitee replied, "My family is down there. A home I have not seen for over three cycles. I've prayed many nights that I would make it home alive to see this world."

"And whilst you were praying for that" Falshree muttered, pretending to stifle a cough in her throat, "I was preying for something very different, and it was neither family nor home. Though he did have two legs and the most pleasâ€|"

Nakitee's claw whipped out towards her friends head, Falshree chuckling as she ducked under the blow. It was the same old Falshree she had come to treasure almost as much as a blood kin these last three cycles. The observation deck was filled with Sangheili from her lance and the greater cohort. Every single one of them alive today she knew by name and had come to love them all as her sisters, as well as those who had not returned.

To her immediate right was a slim Sangheili named Zakamee. The unit's medical adjutant was watching the passing orbital traffic, her forearms resting on the observation decks protective rail. The slightly older female was known to be somewhat anxious at the best of times, always fretful about the hatchling she had birthed just before she had shipped out to begin her mandatory term of service.

A few paces away and towering above her sister legionnaire's stood Tasmansee, the lance's heavy weapons specialist. It was well known and frequently contested that she was the physically strongest warrior in the cohort. By her side was a lithe Sangheili named Ahrmonree, one of the lance's four designated sharp shooters and reputedly Tasmansee's lover. The maverick female was known to instantly modify any weapons she got her claws on, religious regulations be damned.

Regrettably Elar' Putamee, their lance's commander and a seasoned warrior was laid out in the cruiser's infirmary, apparently suffering from a rare and quite aggressive strain of Talakreche flu. The ship's Healer's had told them that she would be laid low for a full quarter of a cycle, but that she should make a full recovery in time.

Sepheria Luminare was rapidly growing in size before them. Beyond the energy shielded viewing port Nakitee could begin to pick out the individual landmasses from between the oceans. Her home was on the peripheral edge of the globe. Sunrise would be soon and her family would awake if they had not already risen.

Sepheria Luminare was not any mere colony world in the Covenant's

vast dominion of space. Being one of the first extra-solar colonies of the pre-covenant Sangheili Empire many millennia ago, it had become a triumphant symbol of her people's mastery of the stars, their first mark in an interstellar civilisation that would endure for millennia. Subsequent generations of space travel had forged the resource rich system into a focal point for every major trade route and supply line that wound their way through the ever expanding Covenant Empire. Today the system saw more inter-system travel then some of the homeworld's.

As the cruiser's approach vector brought them closer and closer to Luminare's orbit, Nakitee could make out the expansive network of spaceports, dry-docks and defence satellites that ringed the entire world in two halo like superstructures, one stretching over the equator and the other over the polar ice caps. Hundreds of Covenant warships from small CPV-class destroyers and corvettes to immense assault carriers were locked into the colossal dry docks built into the rings. Nakitee knew from her father's correspondence that the dry-docks were in continuous use all cycle as task forces arrived from the front lines, rearmed and departed in the ongoing wars against the humans.

"Your father's ship" Falshree asked, "Do you know which one it is?"

"No" Nakitee shook her head, "He took command of a Reverent-class heavy cruiser last cycle. It is one of a new classification, only forty have so far been constructed." She reached out and pointed towards one of the dry docks at the far side of the planet, "That could be it but I can't be sure from this distance."

An alert sounded throughout the ship cutting the two Sangheili off from their conversation. Nakitee recognized it as the warning given when the ship was on its final approach vector. Steadily and without rush the Sangheili began to vacate the observation deck.

Nakitee and Falshree collected their meagre possessions from their hold. Three full cycles of occupation duty on a smattering of backwater Jiralhanae colonies garnered few souvenirs. Saying a customary goodbye to the ship they departed to the cruiser's expansive hanger bays. Already a small but significant number of Sangheili were waiting there, vacuum sealed duffel bags slung over their shoulders. Clearly they were not the only ones who wanted to get off the ship fast.

Kig-yar in heavy radiation suits guided the females to Shadow-class dropship's waiting on the hanger deck to transport them to the surface. Nakitee and Falshree sat together towards the rear of the drop-ship's starboard fin.

"Ah, my favorite part" Falshree said as she strapped herself in.

"Gods" Nakitee muttered, "I hate space travel."

A moment later the drop-ship launched, and Nakitee could swear she felt her stomach trying to force its way up into her throat.

\* \* \*

><p>The northern continental spaceport was a bustling hive of activity as ships from every corner of the Covenant Empire docked, offloaded their cargo, refuelled and launched in an endless cycle of sunrise and sunset. Hundreds of thousands of Covenant citizens passed through the vast spaceport everyday, and below the crowded upper levels a vast army of Yanme'e and Huragok engineers toiled to keep the miniature city's four plasma reactors running.<p>

Suka' Nakitee's Spirit drop-ship touched down on the southern tip of one of the spaceports eight major landing pads along with four other low atmospheric transports. The females filed off in practiced military efficiency, Unggoy workers guiding them down the ramps that ringed the expansive landing pads.

It was for the first time in over three cycles that Nakitee felt the humid air brush against her skin whilst powerful rays from Sepheria's burning sun singed her brow and gently warmed the back of her neck. Taking a deep breath, Nakitee closed her eyes and allowed the air to fill her lungs. It was not the choking spores of some Forerunner forsaken swamp world or the stuffy recycled air of a starship but the clean familiar air of her birth world.

The female legionnaire's preceded through the arrival halls where they mixed with the vast crowds of new arrivals which were descending through the vast superstructure of the spaceport. Nakitee saw Sangheili merchants and bureaucrats, scribes and warriors on leave. Kig-yar traders were also amongst them and a small number of Jiralhanae could be seen working their way through the winding passages and bays which ran the length of the spaceport, like the arterial arteries of some great leviathan from the ocean.

Just outside of central transport hub Falshree folded her claw like hand around Nakitee's arm and pulled her to one side.

"This is where I must leave you" Falshree said, her dark eyes gleaming in the luminous lighting of the walls.

"Sister, you know you are always welcome in my family's estate" Nakitee replied, "Why not come and stay with us for just a few rotations."

"You know that I can take care of myself Nakitee", Falshree grinned, "We will stay in touch. You have my comm.'s frequency, do you not?"

With a nod of her head Nakitee flicked her wrist, a small holo-unit built into her armguard expanded into a holographic dome above her palm. Nakitee navigated the holo-interface, checking that her friends contact frequency was loaded and saved before dismissing the holo-dome with another flick of her wrist.

The two sister legionnaire's lent into each other, clasping arms beneath their cloaks. Clicking her mandibles Falshree brushed past her friend and made her way towards one of the waiting grav transports.

"Contact me come sunrise" Nakitee called "We will arrange a time and place to meet."

"Better make that two sunrises" Falshree called back as she stepped



onto the grav craft, "And bring the strongest flask of caffeine money can buy. My head will need the clarity after the night that I have planned."

Nakitee shook her head, "Just stay safe Falshree" she laughed, "Do not do anything foolish."

"And where would be the fun in that?"

After watching Falshree's own transport glide silently away on a single luminous grav line, Nakitee boarded her own waiting transport. Making her way down the steps that descended the spaceport's upper platforms and transport hubs she was greeted by a latticework of lush expansive gardens that ringed the outskirts of the spaceport's gates. The gardens were thronged with hundreds, perhaps thousands of Sangheili and attendant Unggoy servants. She scanned the sea of faces as she reached the base of the steps. It had been so very long.

She never saw the two younglings until they were almost under her hooves, bursting out from between the adult Sangheili before her. The children bounded into her legs with such force that Nakitee was almost knocked backwards. Biting down a curse at the back of her throat Nakitee reached down clasping each hatchling by the scruff of their necks and none to gently hoisting them from her legs.

"What in the Gods" she breathed, "What are you two?"

She suddenly stopped, her eyes narrowing as she looked the two younglings over. Three cycles was a long time indeed. The two hatchlings had been much smaller when she had seen them last newly emerged from their eggs, blind and deaf in her parent's birth crèche.

Kneeling down Nakitee hooked a powerful arm under each youngling and lifted them into the air. Her siblings giggled as she embraced them in a crushing bear hug.

"How you two have grown" Nakitee said as she deposited them both back to the ground.

The emergence of two other Sangheili from the pressing crowd drew Nakitee's attention from her siblings. One of them, a towering male was clad in the golden armour of a Ship Master, his imposing height and muscular build ensured the bunched crowd maintained a respectful distance. The second Sangheili was a female, a lither figure then her mate and clad in a simple yet expensively embroiled cloak and hood.

"My daughter" the Ship Master said, reaching towards Nakitee and clasping her in his huge arms, "By the Forerunners look at you! My child has become a full grown Sangheili of beauty and strength."

"Father" Nakitee replied, leaning into the Sangheili's chest, a chest she had not huddled into for over three long cycles. The armour had been silver then, Varo' Nakitee Commander but not the master of the ship he now captained.

Nakitee's mother approached, soothing the chuckling hatchlings with a claw on each of their shoulders. As her father released her from his

chest, she turned towards the Sangheili that had hatched her.

"Suka" Essa' Nakitee said as she reached forward and hooked Nakitee's chin in her slender claws, "Oh how you have grown. You were but a child when you left us, and now you return not just an adult but a warrior, confident and disciplined."

Nakitee smiled, her mandibles parting in a gesture of affection. She had not yet communicated to her parents her desire to leave the military, but saw the unsaid understanding in her father's eyes. He had rarely spoken of his campaigns against the humans, but she knew he had seen things, committed acts he would never wish his children to have to witness for themselves.

Her parents led her to a private transport, a civilian model Spectre which was parked in one of the spaceports depots. Her sibling's played a game in the rear most seats concerning who could swipe hardest and who could duck their head out of the way of their brother's oncoming claws the fastest in an alternating pattern of giggles and yelps. The adults talked all the way back to the Nakitee family estate.

\* \* \*

><p>Varo' Nakitee met his old friend and colleague at the Temple of Sanctus in the late evening, just as Luminare's bloated sun was settling in the east far behind the great mountain chains. The Vestal Shrine was on the outskirts of the capital city's southern quarter nestled between the sloping marble avenues of the administrative district and the expansive fields of the continental plains.<p>

Commander Taia' Korequee was knelt in silent prayer before the temple's central alter, his claw like hands folded across his chest and his head bowed humbly inside the sanctum's walls.

Varo paused at the edge of the temple, taking a moment to admire the age old structure. It was not among the grandest of temples on Sepheria Luminare's soil. The rich Sangheili colony world was hardly short of majestic and elaborate shrine's as wealthy pilgrims provided a large proportion of the planet's annual income. For those who attended its holy ground's that evening, the temple was a place of quite refuge and sanctuary in an otherwise cruel and chaotic universe.

Korequee breathed in deeply, his conjoined lung expanding under his rib cage as he opened his eyes, his body still.

"How long has it been Nakitee" he asked without turning around "three cycles? And when?"

"Our engagement above their agricultural world" Varo replied with a click of his lower mandibles, "What did the humans call it?" he asked rhetorically, titling his head towards the sky.

"Kholo" Korequee replied in deeply accented Sangheili. Slowly the Special Operation's Commander rose to his full height and stretched his shoulders before clasping his hands behind his back. He had not yet turned from the alter.

"I hope you have not been waiting their long Ship Master."

Varo shook his head in amusement, "It is impolite to disturb the contemplation of another in a place of worship."

"Utter drivel" Korequee retorted throatily, "Prolonged exposure to my rhetoric already drives a good portion of our cadet's to near suicide each cycle. What I am doing here to our Lord's must amount to the greatest sacrilege of all my brother."

Varo stared at Korequee, his mandibles clenching tightly. What his old friend had just said was borderline heresy, but he could not hold it in any longer.

Varo sniggered, clasping a clawed hand over his mouth as he tried to stifle further laughter, tried and failed. Korequee chuckled, his deep throaty chortle wringed throughout the Temple preceding the rumbling laughter of the two warriors which drew sharp glares from the other worshipers there that evening.

They speedily vacated the Temple of Sanctus in due haste, finding a quite tavern which overlooked the sprawling plains on the edge of the city. Varo hailed the attending Unggoy waiter and ordered two thick sacra ale's, tipping the creature two antiquated metal coins. The two Sangheili found seats and a table on the very edge of the street where they caught the most of the sun, the little Unggoy servant returning with their drinks a moment later.

"A fine cruiser" Korequee commented as he picked up his flagon of ale, "the Eternal Luminance."

Varo paused, cocking his head towards the Commander, "My promotion has not yet been made official. How in the Heaven's did you know?"

"I have my sources Nakitee. And while I am not naming any names, your tactical officer becomes quite talkative after a few dozens drinks."

Varo clicked his lower mandibles, "I'll discuss Valkurieee's liberal interpretation of confidentially with him upon my return, but enough of business. I have cause for celebration this sunrise."

"Your daughter" Korequee said, clicking his clawed fingers, "Suka?"

Varo nodded as he took a sip of his ale, "She returned early this morning. I have not left the family estate all day."

"How many cycles is she now, twelve?"

"Thirteen"

"Your bond mate must be glad she has returned" Korequee said, "If there is certainly one thing the Jiralhanae are worse at then being allies, it's subjects."

"I think I preferred them as enemies" Varo replied, "The Jiralhanae are now free to carry weapons in their own cities, and ever since the amalgamation our soldiers cannot fire without provocation, true

provocation I mean."

"You mean an obstinate glare is no longer justification for a beating" Korequee asked rhetorically, "May just happen that the hairy primate is related to the local tribal Chieftain."

"Their leaders plead to the High Council of their insecurity" Varo hissed, "They beg us to support their claims then tie the hands of our warriors before they have even set hooves upon the Jiralhanae's infernal worlds. It put's our young at risk."

Shrugging his shoulders Korequee drained the last of his flagon in one long mouthful before rising to his hooves and stretching his neck, "Has your daughter decided what to do now she has returned to your estate?"

"Her mandatory term of service is now complete" Varo replied, returning his now empty flagon to the table, "She was never keen on pursuing a military career past her compulsory service. Before she left for the Talakreche world's the Ministry of Fortitude had already offered her a position within the Central Archives and Account's."

"A respectable position" Korequee agreed, "Close to the capital and well paid." He scratched at his lower mandibles, staring at the far mountain ranges to the west, "I still remember our own service, the Y'Deio system."

"Blasted Kig-yar and their infernal satellite colonies" Varo hissed as he rose from his seat, "Couldn't have colonized actual planets like a normal race."

"Then straight after our mandatory service was complete, we were thrust into those bloody skirmishes with the Pfhors in the Qual'tek systems" Korequee continued, turning towards Varo and folding his arms, "phony war my hind. We lost almost a hundred ships. The Fleet of Valiant Prudence was mauled to the bone, whilst the Pfhors had landed almost twenty legions planetside before we cut them off from their supply lines."

Varo shook his head at the thought, "I remember. God's if the \_Seeker of Truth\_ hadn't made that last assault run against their battleships, their storm troops could have overrun us. They nearly did as it was. It did seem the Hierarchs and the High Council were out to kill us that cycle."

"And now we find ourselves immersed in yet another war" Korequee said as he leant back against the taverns outer wall, "Be thankful your daughter's service is finally at an end."

"The Humans" Varo snorted with a derisive shake of his head, "You cannot compare our campaign's against the infidel's to the slaughter and raiding our people suffered at the hands of the Pfhors. The humans cannot threaten our worlds and we continue sweep aside their defenses cycle after cycle, scattering their fleets wherever they mass. They cannot stand before us."

"In space your argument holds true" Korequee conceded, "yet it is a different story entirely planet side. Our clashes with the Pfhors, even our wars against Jiralhanae insurrectionists had rules and

boundaries, dictated by our simple desire for conquest. Our crusade against the humans allows for no such rules, our only objective is their complete extermination, and they know this. Eradication impels an enemy to fight harder than any other and can make the most inferior of races dangerous beyond all measure."

"Our crusade with there kind is nearly ended" Varo pressed, "Every Ship Master anti-spinward of Sangheilios knows this. We press closer and closer to their home systems with each passing cycle, confining them to ever tightening pocket. Soon we will be able to draw the bulk of their ships into a single decisive engagement and eradicate their fleet once and for all."

"I would not be so eager to engage them in a mainline battle" Korequee countered waiving a clawed forefinger in front of his friend, "even with their crude weaponry and propulsion technologies, they have shown a tenacity that verges on suicidal genius at times. They inflicted crippling losses on our forces at Minoris and Miridem even if we were able to glass their worlds, and their Fleet Commander's entrapment of our ships at Psi Serpentis was nothing short of sheer tactical brilliance."

"Fleet Master Zakukree was beyond incompetent" Varo growled, "I understand that his two daughters have been forbidden from breeding and had he survived his defeat the High Council would have strung him up by his entrails. It matters little, the humans infernal Admiral, this Cole perished in the battle. Wattinree will ensure Psi Serpentis isn't repeated."

"He would be best not to" Korequee said, "We can ill afford the loss of so many trained warriors again. It is exactly this kind of kind of incident that would make your daughters military record so appetising to the Ministry of Resources."

"Conscription?" Varo paused before shaking his head, "They wouldn't dare. Her generation have served their three cycles in armour, and they would have to come through me first. Let them draw their resources from the next pool of draftees, we are hardly short of young warriors."

Korequee glanced back towards the distant mountains, letting the evening sun gently bake the skin on his face, "How long are you back for?"

"I'm not sure. Half the fleet of Particular Justice is docked in high orbit along with the vessels of Vigilance, Prudence and a dozen others. I'm on leave until further notice."

"Interesting" Korequee mused, massaging his lower mandibles with a knuckle, "Over forty Special Operation Brigades have been recalled so far, thousands of warriors are returning daily. The Academy is literally awash with returned warriors cooling their hooves. I've already heard every brewery from here to the southern polar caps has been emptied. Not even the merchants new so many were returning."

"Then you believe the High Council is preparing for a major offensive?"

Korequee didn't respond right away, pondering his friends words, "Or

at least a significant redeployment of our available assets to pre-empt a multiple system advance. But the rearming of our fleet alone will keep us busy until the end of the cycle and I would wager the humans still have a sizable fleet between us and their homeworld, wherever in this spiral arm that may be."

"We can wait" Varo decided, "After all. Time is our ally and our enemy's adversary. Even if it takes another ten cycles we will see the beginning of the Great Journey within our lifetimes, within my children's lifetimes."

Korequee turned back towards him, his mandibles clenching tightly and his eyes sober. All at once Varo knew the memory he had disturbed, the one his friend had tried so hard to suppress.

"I still remember that day in the hatchery" Korequee said, "Orsi delivering the hatchling, passing her to Essaâ€¦"

Korequee faltered, his claws curling around the empty flagon in his hand.

"She loved you Taia" Varo said, clasping his hand over Korequee shoulder guard, "With all her heart. Had it not been for your partner, my own child, possibly even Essa may not be here now. I owe your family a debt that I can never repay."

"Her passing was the hardest cycle of my life" Korequee said, "But it was also the same day that your daughter was born Nakitee. Orsi loved your family. She'd have wanted this day to be one of happiness, for both of us."

\* \* \*

><p>The Sangheili Special Operation's Group possessed a bond stronger than blood.<p>

They were the best of all arms of the combined Covenant military. They were experienced, they were battle hardened and they drilled until they psychically bled. As a result their pay was high, their unit's small and their deployments long.

Seldom did a cohort much less an entire brigade receive indefinite leave on colony world as affluent and prosperous as Sepheria Luminare. In was a time honoured tradition that when the Forerunners graced the warriors of the vaunted Special Operation's Group with such a bounty, they would drink their host city dry, or be rushed the nearest field hospital trying.

Juha' Relusee estimated he was about half way there. Then he recalled he was extremely drunk, and really shouldn't be listening to himself.

His immediate fourunit milled around the table in various states of consciousness. Across the table Zel' Tasolmee, a thickly set bullish warrior grappled with a returning terrestrial legionnaire by the name of Zera' Falshree. The two were teetering on the edge of the same chair and had not parted mandibles for the past few units. Relusee knew Tasolmee was not perfect in abiding by the Covenant's traditionally stringent ethics on mating, but in all likelihood the female had gone longer without seeing a male of her own species then

vise versa.

Beside him Kalu' Texlusee, a female of patrician beauty and the reflexes of a blood wolf sat poised with her back to the wall and her eyes closed. Despite the aristocratic Sangheili's cold exterior and unsettling demeanour, the entire unit knew the female could place a carbine round between the eyes of a swamp rodent from a thousand meters, even when her head was clouded by the haze of a dozen shots of spirited alcohol.

Relusee glanced back towards the open bar, searching for the newest member of their fourunit. The club was full to bursting point with the heave of towering Sangheili warriors on leave drinking and laughing, and even a handful Jiralhanae milled in small groups. A smattering of panicked Unggoy servants scrambled between the mass of warriors trying desperately to deliver their trays of drinks and avoid the heavy hooves of the drunken Sangheili. Relusee found Varu' Kilshree not far from their table, in a heated argument with a pillar.

Relusee shook his head, looking again. He had not been mistaken. The headstrong male was standing, flagon in hand screaming bloody obscenities at a plassteel support pillar, another Sangheili beside him agreeing with every insult he hurtled.

The tavern was not particularly special. Adequate liquor, if not overpriced. Expedient service, if not always accurate yet with hundreds of thousands of warriors returning to Sepheria Luminare, such drinking holes were in short supply. Outside the street teemed with dozens more Sangheili and more than a few Jiralhanae. A large number of bouncers, thickly set former military Sangheili clad in heavy grey armour and wielding shock mauls patrolled the street breaking up clashes between crowds of rowdy off-duty soldiers.

A sequenced chime drew Relusee's attention down to the holo-unit built into his wrist gauntlet. With a flick of his claw like hand a blue hollow bubble expanded across his grey palm. With a groan he recognized the order that had been transmitted to him, a primary level report order. He had only received such an order once, shortly after the disastrous battle of Psi Serpentis and with new clarity he realized what it meant. Return to your marshal point with immediate effect no matter your rank, location or condition. Failure to report will result in the severest of punishments.

Looking up, Relusee realized he was not the only one to have received the message. Tasolmee, Texlusee, Kilshree and even Falshree were each looking at their own wrist mounted holographic interfaces, their faces suddenly sober. Not just them, Relusee realized. The tavern had fallen silent, every Sangheili looking into the blue holographic bubble across their hand. Outside dozens of glowing blue globes illuminated the night.

Word spread like wildfire across the capital. The returning Covenant legions were marching to war.

\* \* \*

><p>Suka' Nakitee awoke sometime deep into the night, an icy knot she had not felt since she was among the Talakreche worlds twisting painfully at her insides.<p>

She fumbled in the darkness as her eyes adjusted to the Sepherian midnight, a searing pain spreading across her temples. Discarding the soft quilted covers Nakitee swung her legs over the edge of the bed, knelt forward and massaged her brow. Her claws came away coated in sweat.

Something was terribly wrong. She could feel it all the way down to her bones.

Nakitee gave herself a precious few moments to compose herself, taking slow deep breaths to circulate her blood flow to every corner of her body. Gradually her head stopped spinning and the pain receded, her vision returning. Rising from her bed she strolled across her room, dispatching the holo-blind with a gentle wave of her hand. Luminare's sole moon glistened like a golden sphere high above the mainland, its gentle amber glow illuminating the capital city in place of its daily counterpart. From her family's estate Nakitee could make out the Leymor lake at the edge of the city's boundaries, the water rippling in the calm night breeze.

Standing by the window, the moon's ochre hue illuminating her skin brought another realization to the returned warrior, she was stark naked.

On the Talakreche world's she had always slept in her bodyglove, if not in her full armour during the weeks the locals were feeling that extra tad bit tenacious. Had she really been that tired the night before?

She had not felt that safe in cycles.

Wrapping herself in a simple gown of silk Nakitee made her way towards the landing, gently easing her doorway open. The corridors were shrouded in darkness that night, the automated holo-blinds allowing only the slimmest rays of moonlight to penetrate the gloom that enveloped the Nakitee household.

Suka checked on her younger siblings first, feeling with her hand for the door in the darkness. The two younglings were sound asleep, curled beneath their blankets in their joined room. An aged Unggoy housemaid was coiled on the chair in the far corner of the room, slumbering in the servant races classic sleeping position.

Ensuring the door was closed tightly behind her Nakitee made her way downstairs, descending the winding staircase that twisted its way up the spine of the old manor house. She could hear a lower murmur coming from the ground floor, the deep clipped voices of two adult Sangheili. She paused on the lower landing which overlooked the kitchen, straining to make out the words.

"\_Why was it not glassed!" \_she heard her mother scream.

She could hear her father, his voice hushed as he tried to keep their argument confined to the lower floor. Whatever it was he said, it seemed to do little to calm Nakitee's mother down.

"\_She's served her three cycles. The council could never enforce this order!"\_



Nakitee descended the final flight of steps, straining to hear what her father was saying. Something about mineral deposits, 'strategic point' she heard Varo mention.

Her mother hissed, bringing her voice down as she tried to exercise some control lest she wake the entire household. She said something about 'Unggoy workers', 'indentured labour.'

Walking across the hallway Nakitee pressed her palm to the activation crystal, the arched doorway beside her sliding silently open and illuminating the lower hallway with the kitchens artificial lighting.

"Humans should beâ€¦" her mothers words evaporated in her throat as her daughter entered the room, both parents twisting to face their first born child.

"Suka" her father said, "You're awake."

"What has happened?" she asked.

Her father parted his mandibles to speak but paused, unable to summon the words. Nakitee turned towards her mother, the family matriarch averting her eyes from her daughter, her grey claws curling around a freshly replicated parchment of transcript.

"What are you holding?"

"It's nothing" Essa lied.

"Mother?"

"You must show her Essa" Varo said.

"No!"

"Essa!" Varo barked.

With a vehement hiss Essa slapped the parchment down on the kitchen table, scowling at Varo as she did so, her eyes screaming bloody murder.

Nakitee reached forward and took the parchment from the table, the scroll emitting a soft crackle of energy as her claws creased the thin plasma field which enveloped the holo-glyph's. She scanned the document, taking note of the official emblem of the Ministry of Resource. Much of the text was regular regurgitated bureaucracy. A small part detailed the strategic necessity of access to raw materials in relation to internal security, the Covenant's various obligations to the defence of its members and allies, the untrustworthiness of their neighbouring states, and off course the ongoing crusade against the human infidels. Nakitee quickly found the origin of her parent's distress, her mandibles parting as she read the words.

\_First Daughter of House Nakitee\_

\_By order of the Ministry of Resource, you have been hereby selected for your previous combat experience by the Fleet of Furious Redemption.\_

Nakitee scanned through the rest of the document, the words burning against the inside of her skull.

\_Interplanetary Security Force\_

\_Occupation and Administrative Zone's\_

\_Slave Labour\_

\_Humans\_

\_Deployment imminent. Coordinates for embarkation will follow; immediate haste must be made to such provided coordinates, no exceptions. Any violation of these orders will be punishable by death.\_

\_By order of the Prophet of Penance.\_

Nakitee read through the parchment a second time, and then a third time just to be certain that her eyes were not deceiving her. All was once again quite in the Sangheili household, for one brief moment.

"It's unprecedented" Essa breathed. Suka could see blood dripping from her curled fists where her mother sharp claws her were digging into her palms.

She was truly enraged.

"You don't have to go Suka."

"Essa" her father cautioned.

"She doesn't" the Sangheili woman almost screamed, "We have money and influence. What good is such wealth if you cannot use it. Whatever they want we will give it!"

Nakitee looked towards her father. He blanched, what they were discussing was illegal, the repercussions severe.

"It could be done" he replied solemnly "We have friends within the High Command, but if we are to do this I must act now."

Nakitee paused, considering the question for just one moment. That was all it took to make up her mind, "No!"

"Suka!" her mother hissed.

"My life is no more precious then any others" she replied firmly, "and I will not bring shame to your name by using its association to shirk my duty whilst others risk their lives."

"You have served your time child" Essa pleaded, "You have done no less than the empire asked of myself and your father in our youth."

"There will be others Suka" Varo said, "Without shame they will use their family's power and influence to avoid this order."

"That is their misdeed father" Nakitee replied "and it would not alleviate my own were I to follow suit. For every son or daughter to evade this order there will be many more who cannot or will not. I will not discuss this notion any further."

Her father paused, exhaling deeply, something that may well have passed for admiration crossing his face. Her mother looked like she was going to continue the argument but Suka stalled her by raising her spread hand.

"The subsequent deployment orders could come through at any moment. I must get ready to leave, possibly at first light."

She turned on her heel, walking towards the kitchen door.

"Where are you going?" her mother asked.

"To say goodbye to my brothers. I don't know when I may see them again."

### 3. Chapter 2 " Subjugation

**\*\*Chapter 2 " Subjugation\*\***

**\*\*- New Carthagian Instrument of Surrender " 03 / 10 / 2544\*\***

We, the provisional civilian government of New Carthage, do hereby accept the terms of surrender set forth in the declaration issued by the Master's of the Fleet of Furious Redemption, hereafter also referred to as the Covenant Interstellar Navy.

We do hereby proclaim the unconditional surrender to the Covenant Interstellar Navy of the Carthaginian Central Command Headquarters and all human armed forces under the Command of the Carthaginian Colonial Government.

All human forces wherever situated upon New Carthage are with immediate effect to cease any and all hostilities with Covenant ground forces, to preserve from damage all vehicles, spacecraft, military and civil property and to comply with all requests and requirements imposed by the Master's of the Covenant Interstellar Navy.

We do hereby command all officers of the colonial militia regiment's and Carthaginian Constabulary precinct's to order those under their command to lay down their weapons and munitions. All officer's still subordinate to the United Nation Space Command Defence Force are to seek immediate transport off world. If immediate extraction is not possible they are to place themselves under the jurisdiction of the closest officer of the Carthaginian Constabulary.

We do hereby command all civilian authorities across New Carthage and all humans in general to carry out the provisions of this declaration in good faith, and to obey any orders or directives which may be required by the representatives of the Master's of the Fleet of Furious Redemption or by any other designated representative of the Covenant Interstellar Navy for the purpose of giving effect to this declaration.

\_The authority of the Emergency Senate of New Carthage shall be subject to the Master of the Fleet of Furious Redemption who will take such steps as he deems necessary to effectuate these terms of surrender.\_

\_Signed at Novago Central Hub Station on the third day of October, 2544\_

\*\*\_Signatories\_\*\*

\*\*\_Margo Sebastian\_\*\*

\_- Colonial Governor of New Carthage (Died in incarceration at Facility 009 on the fifteenth day of October 2544.)\_

\*\*\_Orsa' Talsharnee\_\*\*

\_- Fleet Master of the Fleet of Furious Redemption, acting General-Governor of New Carthage circa third day of October 2544.\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Location: Covenant Occupied Human Colony World New Carthage<strong>

\*\*Date: 04 / 02 / 2545 (Human Military Calendar)\*\*

\*\*33 Days after the events of Chapter 1\*\*

\*\*57 Days prior to events of Prologue\*\*

"Lazarus cell is gone Sir."

All Major Richard Connor craved in this world at that moment was just a single night on undisturbed sleep.

What he had was a horrific nightmare.

Scratch that, what he had was a horrific nightmare from which he was unable to wake. He and every other single human currently stranded on New Carthage.

The five human resistance officers were crammed into a stuffy foreman's office, deep beneath the hollow shell of a former disused chemical enrichment facility just outside the capital city. He had been assured that the assortment of various chemical compounds still lingering among the ruins of the plant would shield the humans from any orbital scans from the Covenant fleet in orbit.

Connor silently regarded the sprawling map of the planetary capital city of Novago which was spread on across table before them, his forefinger and thumb curled around the edge of his chin.

"Survivors?" he finally asked.

Lieutenant Chaucer, a veteran marine officer and Connor's second in command shook her head, chewing her lower lip. Somewhere at the back of Connor's mind twenty-seven nameless human resistance fighters were

scratched into a seemingly endless list of names.

"Poor bastards never stood a chance" a meaty Carthaginian named Barker growled. He was a shaven headed brute of a man and a former riot officer of the now defunct Carthaginian Conststabulary.

"It was an orbital strike" Chaucer continued, "High yield pulse lasers, deadly accurate. Lazarus's hideout was based somewhere around the old rail depot north of the city. Everyone underground would have been dead before they even knew what was happening."

"What about the other cells in that area?" Connor asked sombrely.

"Covenant troops surrounded the town of Utica last night" replied Martinez, a short stocky army ranger and their chief pathfinder, "My scouts reported hundred of ground troops, supported by artillery and air support. The Covenant didn't discriminate between the resistance fighters and civilians during the attack. The entire population of the town was exterminated."

"We had reports of another mass deployment of Covenant troop's three clicks south of the old space port" Barker added, "Looks like they hit what was left of Bravo Company's third platoon that was hold up in the woodlands. Brute patrols are crawling all over that area now."

"What are the comm.'s lines saying?" Connor asked as he turned towards Anderson, his communication officer and the only member of the cell entrusted with the precious communication frequencies of the other human resistance cells spread across the planet.

Anderson shook his head, "Everyone's quite Sir, probably terrified that the Covenant may have cracked our communication network again. I'm listening for any indications of survivors but the moment we start broadcasting, Sir if the Covenant are listeningâ€¦"

"Understood" Connor replied, running his hands over his closely cropped hair and smoothing his fingers down towards the base of his skull. Three resistance cells and what was left of Bravo Company, over a hundred and fifty men and women dead. And how many civilians had been inside Utica when the Covenant ground it to dust? Hundreds surely, perhaps even a couple of thousand.

"What does it look like inside the capital?"

Chaucer reached down towards the map, tapping her gloved fingertip at the centre of the city, "The Covenant have finished construction of their Forward Operating Base. They flattened most of Novago's downtown district into the ground to make way for it. We have confirmed reports of no less then thirty seven mobile bunkers spread across the FOB's perimeter. Each one is capped with a heavy plasma cannon and ringed with anti air batteries. The whole network is linked with energy barriers that surround the base.

"What do we know about the enemy's numbers?"

"Thousands" Chaucer replied stone faced, "An area the size of downtown could easily hold an entire UNSC armoured division, even a

full corp.'s at a pinch."

"Tanks" Barker added solemnly, "Artillery, supply's depots, refuelling pads for gunships. Bastards probably have a fucking cinema in there too."

\_And what have I got\_ Barker thought sourly, \_The scattered remnants of two marine platoons. A few constable's from a defunct planetary police force and a handful off ill trained militiamen. We may as well be spec on the elite's hooves for all we can threaten them.\_

"What about the civilians?"

Chaucer shook her head, her hardened composure slipping for just a brief moment. Connor suddenly recalled that she had a very young nephew still inside the capital.

"The major cities of Carna, Sidon and Phoen have been completely depopulated over the past two weeks. Their entire inhabitants were shipped to the camps just over the Siamese rivers."

"Do we have verified confirmation on exactly what purpose these facilities serve?"

The question was rhetorical. Humanity had not experienced the horror of industrialised cleansing in over five hundred years, but it had never forgotten.

In the end it was Barker who gave words to everyone's thoughts.

"There death camps, Sir."

"Each camp has a uniform design" Chaucer continued solemnly, "Fifty to a hundred sealed dormitories behind an octagon shaped enclosure. Covenant barracks, motor pool and administrative buildings are located in a separate linked camp. Each facility is based around a central bunker, armoured and reinforced."

"What its purpose?"

Chaucer paused, her hands curling into fists, "We believe that it is some form of pressurised energy chamber. The configuration is similar to the central plasma chamber found in Covenant plasma weapons, but on a much larger scale. Most likelyâ€|"

Barker cut her off before she could finish, "It's how there killing the prisoners in the camps Sir. The murderous swine are vaporizing us."

The five officers were silent, the terrible spectacle playing through all their heads. Chaucer's seven year old nephew, Connor's late uncle and aunt, Barker's stillborn daughter, mercifully spared this horror.

Chaucer shook her head, "There sheer size would allow the Covenant to dispose of hundreds, even thousands of prisoners at once."

"How many camps Lieutenant?"

There was the briefest pause before she answered, "Dozens, maybe over a hundred by now."

Connor lent forwards and placed both of his hands on the table, palms down. He regarded the map before him, an endless stream of figures running through his mind as he added up numbers, subtracted losses, accounted for casualties. He turned back towards Martinez imploringly, "What if we were to launch a raid, how likelyâ€¦"

Martinez shook his head, "My scouts ran a full recon and analysis of one of the camps. Even if we could gather together enough cells for a raid, each camp has heavily entrenched defences and full battalion of Covenant infantry. Our losses would be unsustainable Sir, and even if we could tear a handful of prisoners from the camp, the Covenant could replace them in less than a day."

Connor cursed himself inwardly, nodding his head in seething agreement.

"Lieutenant, based on these camps rate of consumption, how long will it take until the Covenant run out of prisoners?"

Chaucer answered immediately. They'd all had their suspicions for weeks now, and plenty of time to mould their figures together.

"Two months Sir, perhaps three."

Silence descended over the five humans, their helplessness in light of the hellish world they found themselves inhabiting settling heavily on all their shoulder.

It was Barker who finally broke the silence.

"We have another problem Sir."

Connor glanced towards the constable and gestured for him to continue.

"These camps weren't just designed to exterminate New Carthage's population. There based over large mineral deposits, specifically large repositions of technetium. There using the prisoners to as slave labour to mine the raw materials then shipping it up into high orbit."

"You'll have to forgive me sergeant. Science was never my strong point."

"We use refined technetium during maintenance overhauls of Shaw-Fujikawa slip drive engines" Chaucer explained, "It's highly likely the Covenant use it for the same purpose. Without the technetium prolonged translight travel becomes impossible after a matter of weeks."

"You want to disrupt the Covenant supply shipments" Connor replied sceptically. He paused before shaking his head vehemently, "Absolutely out of the question!"

"Major" Barker growled.

"Out of the question" Connor repeated through gritted teeth, "Even if we could mount an operation with a marginal chance of successâ€¦"

"We've already identified a vulnerability in their standard supply route" Anderson cut in, "Deep inside the city. It's a perfect bottle neck. There are still a handful of resistance cells operating inside Novago, if we work togetherâ€¦"

"You know the Covenant will retaliate against the civilian population" Connor snapped, "It'll be the Turpel prairie massacre all over again."

Connor was suddenly back on the wind battered steppe outside the capital, Martinez and himself laid out under a camo-tent two months prior, mere hours after he'd ordered a Covenant checkpoint shelled. The surprise attack and subsequent fire fight through the old industrial unit had left almost fifty Covenant soldiers dead. A victory, or so Connor had thought. He had then watched as the aliens had rounded up over three thousand humans, Covenant elites and jackals marching them out into the grassland's that bordered the capital. There he had watched in stupefied horror as the entire starving terrified mass, infirm, old, young and newborn alike were harried together in one terrible moment before being mown down by scotching plasma and lancing beam fire from hundreds of Covenant plasma rifles and small-arms.

"Not again" Connor snarled, tears forming in his eyes, "I won't sign off another slaughter."

"They've killed millions already" Barker persisted, "If we don't take this opportunity to strike back, then they will all have died in vain."

"I said no!" Connor shouted.

Barker lurched up from his seat, thumping his huge fists down on the table. From the corner of his eyes he saw Martinez reach for the pistol at his side and for a moment thought Barker was going to charge him before Chaucer intervened clasping her hand on Barker's shoulder. The meaty Carthaginian turned towards her, his face fuming. She shook her head before speaking in a much calmer voice.

"Sir, the Covenant are wiping us out systematically, our entire race. The technetium is a key cornerstone in their war effort. If we can disrupt their supply chain, Sir it could have a greater impact on this war than an entire naval battle group. We will not get an opportunity like this again."

"There must be another way" Connor stated, "We can't let others suffer the consequences of our actions. It's not our place to gamble with the lives of thousands, potentially millions of innocent people."

"And if the Covenant were to reach Sol?" Chaucer replied calmly, "If their ships were to breach Earth's defence grid, Sir the casualties would be in the billions."

Connor's jaw clenched, molars grating together so hard they could have broken.



\_She's right\_ Connor thought furiously, \_Damn it she's right.\_

It was that moment that the fight deserted him.

Connor collapsed back wearily into the factory Foreman's long abandoned chair, "You already have an initial strategy planned out for the ambush?"

Both Barker and Anderson nodded their heads in agreement.

"We've already made contact with the local resistance cells Sir" Anderson said "The convoy will be passing through in ten days."

"We'll take half the men" Connor decided, blinking away the sleet at the lip of his tear ducts, "Get me everything we have on the ambush site."

\_God forgive me.\_

\* \* \*

><p>The Central Spire had been the first of many fortifications to be erected by the Covenant in the former human capital. Nestled into the heart of an expansive latticework of barracks, supply depots and defence turrets that occupied a great deal of central Novago, the five kilometre high spire served as a Command & Control centre for the entire Covenant occupation force across the Carthaginian system.<p>

It was with a tepid amusement that Commander Taia' Korequee descended the Spire's executive gravity elevator, steeling himself for the evening that was to come. The elevator took him to the very base of the superstructure, beneath the C&C, primary defence matrix and auxiliary power core. It was here, buried half a mile into the planets crust that his guests awaited him.

Korequee stepped out of the elevator and found himself staring down a plain corridor, two Sangheili Honour Guards clad in gleaming armour standing sentry at the other end.

The Honour Guards greeted him silently. A simple blood swipe confirmed that he was Taia' Korequee, Sangheili, twenty seven cycles of age and not an imposter. Once the necessary formalities had been completed the two Guards tapped their ceremonial spears once on the floor. A hidden doorway behind them slid open and they waved the Commander through.

In contrast to the featureless corridor, the hidden quarters behind were anything but plain. The architects had clearly striven to replicate the luxurious mansion estates common to the Homeworld's or even High Charity, and as far as Korequee was concerned they had succeeded. A soft velvet rug curled beneath his hooves whilst the walls and ceiling were adorned with a myriad web of fantastically intricate tapestries from across the Covenant Empire. Korequee tried to remember when he had last seen such lavish comfort in what was still in theory an active pacification zone.

"My good Commander, you have arrived."

Korequee found his fellow guests in the bunker-palace's banquet hall, yet despite the length of the table only three individuals were seated.

The Prophet of Penance, their host for the evening was the first to greet him, the aged San 'Shyuum dabbing his long gnarled fingers with a silver napkin. With an almost elegant subtleness Penance edged his bobbling gravity throne back from the table, making a strained yet seemingly heartfelt attempt to welcome his guest like a long lost kinsmen.

"I thank you for your invitation Excellency" Korequee replied, allowing the elderly Prophet to guide him to his seat, "and ask that you forgive my late arrival."

Penance smiled, his wizened old features creasing in the artificial lighting. With an almost fatherly warmth he patted Korequee's shoulder, "Think nothing of it my child. Were I to throw down my hands and beg forgiveness for every invitation I had been late to attend, my spine would have snapped from exhaustion long ago."

The remaining guests at the table were both of Korequee's own race, one a towering patriarch in the resplendent golden armour of a Fleet Master and the other a strikingly beautiful female clad in the crimson robes and headdress of a Vestal High Priestess.

Penance waited until Korequee was seated then clapped his hands twice. A trio of Kig-yar servants in bleached white aprons and gloves emerged from the adjourning serving room, each bearing a stacked platter mounted on a gravity dais. One by one each dish was served up onto the table with trembling hands. Sliced meat, spiced herb bread, platted entrails of Jiralhanae thorn beast and bowls of Sangheili hulworms among other more exotic treats. Korequee blushed as his stomach growled, he had been subsiding on standard issue military rations these last few rotations, and the mere smell of the food threatened a mutiny within his bowels.

The servants retired to the kitchen and in ceremonial tradition Penance invited them to dine.

Korequee studied the two Sangheili as he ate. The male he recognized as Fleet Master Orsa' Talsharnee, the highest ranking officer of the Covenant Armada in the system and appointed Provisional Governor of the Nu Carthage. Talsharnee was a Sangheili of ancient lineage, one of the blue blooded elite of Sangheilios. They had met on several occasions but each time only by a stroke of fleeting chance. Korequee would not have held it against the aristocrat had he been remiss in recalling the Commander's name.

The female he recognized as High Priestess Seja' Ikarshree. He knew her by reputation only for they had never met. Korequee understood her to be the heiress of a wealthy if somewhat common family, their claws unstained by inter-clan politics. Yet it was common knowledge that she was as priestess of the Vestal Sisterhood's inner circle, reputed to have the ear of the High Emperor back on Sangheilios.

Looking at her for a moment Korequee saw something of his late bond mate in the High Priestess, her sharp features and lithe form flaring

before his eyes for a brief moment. Ikarshree turned towards him, her emerald green eyes blinking as a heavy pressure pieced his hearts and threatening to smother him in its embrace.

And in another moment it was over. The priestess reached forward to refill her glass, averting her eyes as she reclined in her seat, sipping her wine.

The conversation at the table was informal and confined mostly between Penance and Talsharnee concerning matters of military and politics. Occasionally one of them would defer to Korequee when the conversation strayed to matters concerning planetary warfare, inviting Korequee's opinion as a 'ground brawler' as Talsharnee described the Covenant Ground Forces after he had consumed a tad bit to much wine. Korequee took no offense.

As the evening wore on the servants returned to clear the table, again wordlessly returning to the kitchens once there task was done. It was then that Penance turned to Korequee, the taught haggard skin of his face seeming to soften.

"My good Commander, you have spoken little this night and yet I sense there are so many questions you wish to ask me. Please Commander, I ask only for your honesty, lay your doubts at my feet."

Korequee drained the last of the wine from his glass, dabbing at his lower mandibles with the serviette as he thought. The San 'Shyuum seemed genuine enough in his sincerity and whilst he would not trust the politician as far as he could throw him, he decided now was a time to speak the truth, if at a measure.

"Why are we here Excellency?" Korequee asked, "Why the need for this occupation, the humans, the camps?"

He heard a soft chuckle from the High Priestess. From across the table Talsharnee smashed a heavy claw like hand down on the table with a thunderous crash. For a moment Korequee feared that his words had caused offense but then realized the Fleet Master was grinning.

"Exactly the point I have made ever since we first set hooves on this infernal ball of frozen rock!"

Penance reached forward and planted a long fingered hand on the Fleet Master's shoulder, his thin lips curling into a paternal old smile, "You ask an important question my children. Now please give an aged San 'Shyuum a few moments of respite to answer."

He paused, stroking the long hairs that drooped from his chin.

The High Priestess cut him off before he could speak.

"You both wish to know the true reason for this occupation. The reason that we have not simply exterminated every last human on this world and migrated in our own work force to mine the raw materials."

Ikarshree's words both pricked Korequee's interest and unnerved him to his core. Up till then the priestess had said very little, adding the odd comment or opinion but for the most part content to merely

observe.

To hear her speak with such cold detachment, even if it were just human vermin they were discussing.

Penance fixed the Sangheili female with a furious glare, his soft fatherly composure evaporating in a second of pure anger.

For her part Ikarshree didn't even flinch.

"My dear friend, you welcomed them here as guests. Was the purpose of this night not to explain our presence here?"

Penance chewed at his shrivelled lips. Finally at a gesture from his wrist he waved her to continue.

Ikarshree spread her claw like hands onto the table before her, clicking her lower mandibles before she began, "Both of you are soldiers, you fight with the weapons and equipment you are provided with. It is only natural for you to look upon the resources we have sunken into this world and ask if they could not be better spent elsewhere."

"We cannot be here for mere resources or this world's strategic value" Korequee conceded, "The sheer volume of troops we have here. My Special Operation Brigades do not warrant mere occupation duty."

"I agree" Talsharnee stated, "The moment we had this system secure we could have transported an army of workers to this world. Enough to scalpel every single drop of technetium within half a cycle."

"Excuse me one moment brothers" Ikarshree said as she rose from her seat. She was tall, taller the Korequee had first thought when she had been seated. She turned and walked towards the nearest cabinet. By her sombre movements Korequee could tell that there was strength beneath her elaborate robes and headdress, not merely a strong sense of will but a powerful body, honed and disciplined. He would not be surprised if she had served as a warrior in her youth and made a mental note to enquire as to her background.

"I apologize" Ikarshree said as she poured herself a glass of water, "Wine is a luxury I rarely afford myself."

She lifted the glass to her mandibles and consumed the water, swallowing the entire content of the silver beaker in one mouthful. Korequee stretched his back as they waited, cracking a saw knuckle.

"The strategic value of this world should not be so casually overlooked" she continued, "Its position anti-spinward of our forces makes it a vital cornerstone in our supply lines. Were the humans to launch a counterattack, if they succeeded in crippling the repair yards we have installed in orbit, such a setback could prove to be, problematic."

"You fear them" Talsharnee snorted dismissively.

"Fear them?" Ikarshree mused as she turned back towards the table,

pausing as she appeared to lend thought to the Fleet Masters remark, "No. But I will not ignore their capacity for destruction."

"You speak as if there is a defined logic to their heretical ways."

Talsharnee almost spat the words and Korequee was suddenly glad the two Honour Guards were outside the sealed chamber and not inside.

"They are barbarians" the Fleet Master roared, claspings his claw like hands to fists in the air, "Even if they had the intelligence and resolve to identify this world's strategic importance, what could they possibly throw at us. More of their primitive warships", he dismissed the notion with a slash of his claws, "My fleet would burn their crude vessels to molten cinders before they ever breached the outer system. You speak as if these filthy primates have an abundance of ships to waist. Their fleets are stretched thin. Any battle group they could dispatch would be a token force and best, to be obliterated."

"War is not a simple matter of two bludgeons" Ikarshree replied apparently unfazed by the Talsharnee retort, "They reached this world once, they can do so again. A single ship or a single soldier Fleet Master, positioned to the right time and place, can cripple an empire."

Talsharnee lent back in his chair, fixing the High Priestess with a carious glare, "You surprise me Ikarshree. I would have thought a daughter of the Vestal Sisterhood would have had more faith. Faith in the Forerunner's to see our crusade to fruition, faith in our fleets and armies to exterminate these cowardly humans."

"You ask me if I support our crusade against this heathen race" Ikarshree said as she made her way back to the table, "I rejoice with every infested world we glass the humans from. You ask me if I have faith in our warrior's ability to prosecute this campaign to its ultimate conclusion. We will burn their kind from this galaxy as surely as the sun will rise on Sangheilios tomorrow. Fear not Fleet Master, I despise the humans with every fibre of my being. They are a pestilence, nothing more and they will be eradicated."

She reached forward and clasped the chairs cushioned headrest with her manicured claws, "But I will not see them underestimated. They are more dangerous then you realize."

The Priestess's words sent an acidic chill down Korequee's spine. He had no love for the humans, more something of a mutual deterrence.

He would have been loath to call in respect, but still. To hear one of such feminine grace and beauty talk of any race, even the humans as if they were nothing more than a thimble roach that she had crushed beneath her hoof.

"Then why are we here?" Talsharnee growled again.

Ikarshree took her seat, pausing at the Fleet Master's question, her mandibles clenched tightly.

Penance leaned forward in his throne, forgotten in the swelling tempest of the last few seconds, "Tell them Seja."

"Are yes" the Priestess conceded softly, "The opposing side of the coin?"

"What?" Talsharnee seethed.

"Allow me to be blunt Fleet Master. For all my warnings of caution, we are winning this war. Technologically, militarily and culturally the humans are simply outmatched. We engage them on all fronts, grinding them further back towards their home system cycle after cycle. It was never a question of if, but rather when we would reach their homeworld."

"And this answers my question how?"

Ikarshree smiled, her sharp teeth glinting malevolently behind her mandibles, "It answers everything."

Talsharnee shook his head in undisguised annoyance, his powerful throat muscles tensing as he prepared a retort. Korequee answered first.

"The Great Journey!"

Both the High Priestess and the Fleet Master twisted towards him, the high born male fuming at his interruption. Penance shielded him.

"The ancient records spoke that at the end of days the faithful would be confronted by a demon race. There at the cusp of ascension they would try to turn us from the light."

"The humans?" Korequee mused rhetorically.

"Perhaps" Ikarshree replied, her voice suddenly distant, "And perhaps not. We know not what form the Great Journey will take. The ancient texts may have been speaking literally, or symbolically. Each of us has our inner demons buried deep within us Commander, demons that must be overcome if we are ever to become one with the God's."

Penance stirred in his throne. Here and now they had touched on the very subject of this simple meal, "There are those among us who will never tread the path of the Great Journey" he began, "They believe themselves righteous and deserving of our Lord's favour. Some are but lowly servants, other individuals of high birth and rank to whom a great many look to for guidance. Some even sit on the High Council."

Korequee felt suddenly very uncomfortable in his seat. They had not even concluded their crusade against the humans and already it seemed Penance and Ikarshree were planning for the next.

"Back to my original question then" Talsharnee snarled through tightly clenched mandibles, "You speak of heresy, kin strife and perhaps civil war. Lines are being drawn, allegiances sworn, this I understand but what advantage are we to garner from this miserable frozen little rock?"

Ikarshree smiled again, that gentle benign smile that chilled Korequee's soul, "Humans have not always infested this world Fleet Master. Many Millennia ago this world was home to another race, a race who's technological marvels appear to have exceeded the psychical limits of this plain."

Talsharnee paused, his lower mandibles twitching as her words sunk in, "This was a Forerunner colony?"

"Colony" Ikarshree mused, "Outpost, scientific or military base, perhaps all of them and more. We are still in the process of cataloguing the ruins."

"Ruins" Korequee gasped. Even the scantest of Forerunner relics was enough to propel an ambitious politician to the highest rungs of power, "Do the Hierarch's know?"

"Do you really believe they would still allow the humans to infest this world if they new the truth" Penance scowled, the skin beneath his eyes suddenly drawn and taught, "And now perhaps you understand our dilemma. Were we to ship ten million workers to this world, we could not keep them from every corner nor could we conceal our excavations. Word would spread I assure you, first rumours, then names. Soon the Hierarch's would be concerned enough to dispatch the Inquisition. But with this world firmly under military occupation, internal security provides us with the perfect opportunity to strip this world of riches far more valuable than mere technetium."

"What is it that you want from us?" Korequee asked, finally coming to comprehend their purpose on this world.

"My dear Commander" Ikarshree replied as she turned towards him. Her voice was soft like that of another female he had once known, seemingly from another life, "Civil war is inevitable, I assure you of that. I know not when or where it will break out or who will stand with us and who will stand against us. When that day comes, fifty legions, two dozen of your Special Operation Brigades and an hundred warships in orbit of this world could well decide the outcome of that conflict, and our path to ultimate ascension. Commander, Fleet Master, we ask for your allegiance."

\* \* \*

><p>The orphanage had always been cold during the winter seasons on New Carthage.<p>

Alex lay awake on his rickety wireframe mattress, listening to the moans and snores of the other children crowded into the basement. His eyes were on the antique styled wristwatch in his hands, his lips moving silently as he counted down the seconds in his mind.

The orphanage had never been the warmest of buildings during the freezing winters on New Carthage, but at least a year ago Alex and the other orphans had the comfort of proper beds and half a dozen portable radiators. Power had been one of the first things the Covenant had taken from the humans of the capital, and ever since Alex and the other children had made do with as many layers of tattered woollen blankets as they could scavenge.

The second hand passed twelve, shunting the hour hand to six hours past midnight. Alex crawled out from beneath his blankets, careful not to wake his companions. Scooping his cloths under one arm the ten year old child crept barefoot towards the far edge of the basement. Easing the storage locker door open Alex promptly dressed himself, slipping on his traded jumper, trousers, gloves and a woollen hat.

Fully clothed, Alex searched blindly in the darkness, carefully running his hands over the stacked boxes and tins, fully aware that the even the smallest clink caused by a falling item would bring the adults upstairs racing down to find him.

The building had not always been an orphanage. Generations ago it had been used to store fossil fuels for the then largely isolated human colony. Alex found the coal shoot with relative ease. Worming his way up the shaft, he forced open the shutter at the top of the chute with both hands.

It was still dark in the adjacent street, the first rays of the morning sun dribbling across the horizon behind the human buildings whilst thickly layered snow filled the road too ankle depth. Alex found the package quickly, a small rucksack stuffed under the blackened shell of an automobile, its size ideal for the young boy.

Strapping the bag over his shoulders Alex checked his watch again, the cold air biting at the exposed skin between his sleeve and glove. Fifteen minutes past the hour. He set off.

Officially the curfew that extended across the city expired at six hours past midnight. Even so there were very few signs of life in the city. The odd curtain twitched behind a window. Hunched decrepit figures scrambled from street to street and in sheltered corners humans gathered around lighted flames.

Alex stayed off the main roads as best he could, sticking to the side streets and alleyways all the while preying the Covenant had not changed their checkpoints again. He was making his way down a deserted avenue perhaps thirty minutes after slipping out of the orphanage when he heard the dreaded drone of the alien's hovercraft behind him.

Alex continued on, his pacing unchanged.

Never run they had told him, Never stop, never linger and never run, less they know you will have something to hide.

The drone increased in its volume, augmented with the course guttural hisses of alien voices. Alex felt a stab of fear as he sensed movement from the corner of his eye, knowing full well that if was to bolt now he would be gunned down before he even cleared the pavement.

The alien hovercraft passed him by without stopping, a crimson beetle like patrol skimmer followed by a dark bluish troop transport packed with towering saurian like elites and jackals. Alex kept his eyes low to the ground, his gaze averted and his breathing steady.

Never make eye contact they had told him, And never let them see



your face.\_

The convoy passed him by without incident, the Covenant soldiers barely taking notice of the small dirty human. As they rounded the street corner Alex crossed the road and ducked into a narrow alleyway.

Another fifteen minutes and he had reached the outskirts of the old market district in the southern quarter of the city. He felt safer here. Humans moved about in greater numbers and more frequent regularity.

\_Lose yourself in the crowd, hide in plain sight.\_

Alex emerged from the alley at the edge of the main trading forum. Even at this early hour the marketplace teemed with people exploring the braziers and stalls on display, dozens and dozens of them. Alex was just about to cross the narrow street into the square when three sleek Covenant troop transports pulled up to the edge of the plaza, a swarm of heavily armed Covenant soldiers emerging from their hovercraft.

Alex shrank back into the alleyway, terror clawing at his insides. He saw the Covenant soldier's storm into the crowd. There were cries of fear and alarm, desperate pleading, human in origin and once again the thick guttural language of Covenant elites. He saw the alien soldiers singling out humans at random from the crowd, marching the Novagian's towards the edge of the square. To his horror Alex realized that one such group of Covenant elites was heading directly towards the alleyway, their weapons drawn.

Alex scrambled back the way he had come, but as he emerged from the other end of the alleyway he caught glimpse of another Covenant patrol blocking the road.

Alex panicked, frantically searching the alleyway for somewhere to hide. The doors were all locked, the windows barred with nailed wood. Alex could hear the first party of Covenant soldiers at the edge of the square now, their long shadows sweeping down the brick walls of the alley. If they were to search him right now, open his pack and see what was stuffed inside. Terrible memories filled his mind, emancipated humans strung up like rag dolls from lamp posts, beaten and bloodied corpses rotting in the gutters.

Hurriedly he found a shallow alcove where the two building met. He crammed the backpack into the tiny niche and pulled forward a heavy metal dustbin to cover the recess. Despite the freezing temperature sweat dripped from Alex brow as he glanced at the furrow the dustbin had left in the snow.

He had nothing to cover it with!

"\_Humane, stop where you are!"\_

\* \* \*

><p>The human crowd dispersed the moment the armoured Shadow transports skimmed to a halt at the edge of the square, the squat soft-skinned alien's miraculously remembering that they had somewhere else to be.<p>

Suka' Nakitee gave her equipment one final cursory check. Her shields read fully charged and her internal gel layer was warm. All clamps in her combat harness were secure and her plasma carbine was fully charged. Satisfied she thumbed the release rune on her wrist gauntlet and with a magnetic thump her armour demagnetised, allowing the Sangheili to step down from the Shadow's troop deck.

"At last" Falshree purred from beside her, grasping the sleek storm-rifle in her claw like hands, "Time for some fun."

The assault lance moved out from their transport, thirty nine Sangheili females supported by a phalanx of sixty Kig-yar auxiliaries. With the exception of a handful of faces the lance was unchanged, its females the same soldiers Nakitee had served with throughout her deployment across the Talakreche worlds. Tasmansee as usual took point, a powerful Concussion-Rifle poised across her huge shoulders whilst Ahrmonree covered the flank. Zakamee took up position with the rear guard, her seldom used Needler strapped at her hip whilst a sealed medical pack was clamped between her shoulder blades.

At the lance's head was their new commander, a towering veteran in battle scarred crimson armour named Kan' Veskeriee. She was almost twice the age of the youngest recruits in the lance and Nakitee understood that this was her sixth tour of duty in five cycles.

Of the two missing Sangheili, Nakitee had heard that one of them had broken an arm during a rather wild night out in Luminare's capital the evening of their return. The other had failed to report for duty and when summoned had absconded from the city. It mattered little to the lance, cohort or legion. The military authorities caught up with all deserters soon enough.

"Move out" Veskeriee hissed gesturing towards the market square with a sharp sweep of her hand, "Full spread, round up a third of the humans for random search and prosecution."

The lance stormed the market square in short order, the warriors fanning out in an ark to cut off any potential stragglers. Falshree sighted two male humans by one of their crude market stools and signalled them out to Nakitee, a mischievous grin tugging at her lower mandibles.

"Humans, halt and kneel" Falshree shouted gesturing with her storm-rifle, her grasp of the human tongue less than perfect. The closest of the squat pink skinned aliens shakily raised its hands, its ugly face twisting in fear as the two Sangheili females approached. Together they rounded up a third human then marched the three prisoners at gunpoint towards the edge of the square where Tasmansee and Ahrmonree had two more humans on their knees. The four Sangheili herded them towards an open alley out of immediate sight of their companions in the market, ushering them towards a tight corner.

A flicker of movement in the corner of her eye caught Nakitee's attention. She twisted on her heel and snapped up her carbine, shouting a warning to halt. A human youngling spun to face the Sangheili warriors, its pasty hands raised as if he had been caught stealing.

One of the humans chose that moment to break from its huddled companions, sprinting towards the open market square. Ahrmonree dropped him with a lancing beam to his chest. The weakling creature tumbled backwards into the midst of its cowering kin.

"Stay where you are" Tasmansee hissed, threatening to drill the entire terrified group with one sweep of her weapon. The blood soaked humans raised their trembling hands, one falling to his knees in terror.

"Was it hiding?" Ahrmonree asked.

Nakitee shrugged her shoulders, her carbine still levelled at the human youth, "We'll find out, Falshree cover the rear."

With a throaty chortle Falshree walked towards the other side of the alley and positioned herself to cover the only other angle of approach. With her flank secure Nakitee holstered her carbine on the magnetic strip running along the small of her back before striding towards the human. Up close the youngling barely reached her thighs. Nakitee reached down then paused. How exactly was she supposed to search one so, small?

She grasped the human youth under his arms and seated the child on one of the metallic like cans which dotted the alleyway. Wasting no time she patted down the human youngling whilst Tasmansee began her own less then gentle body search of the other humans, Ahrmonree and Falshree snickering in amusement whenever one of the aliens yelped in pain. For his part the child endured Nakitee's probing claws with stoic silence as she rifled through his meagre clothing, checking all the usual spots someone may try to hide something. Nakitee felt a sickening lurch in her stomach as she realized just how little meat the child had on his spine.

One of the humans screamed as Tasmansee twisted his forearm in her grasp, the unmistakable sound of a bone cracking echoing down the alleyway. With a blood curdling cry the human fell to his knees, he was pleading for his life, tears streaming down his eyes even as Tasmansee drew her sidearm.

Nakitee clasped her claw her claw like hand over the child temple and folded his head in towards her chest, blocking his view of what was about to happen. He struggled but Nakitee kept her arm curled around him as Tasmansee shot the screaming human point blank in the head.

With methodical precision Tasmansee blasted out the second humans knee cap sending the young female face first into the snow. She screeched in pain, thrashing like a wild animal until a second plasma bolt to the back of the skull silenced her forever. For each hissing plasma bolt, for each and every tortured scream Tasmansee produced as she ran the humans through one by one Nakitee felt the child flinch in her claws, and as it came to an end he was shaking violently against her chest.

Only one human adult remained, an aged male curled into the alley's corner and blabbering like a newborn hatchling. Tasmansee stowed her sidearm and drew a shimmering plasma blade from her gauntlet. Stepping over his dead companions she reached down and cut his

throat.

"All prisoners prosecuted" Tasmansee said coldly, "Nakitee, anything from that one?"

Nakitee shook her head, hoisting the human youngling from the can, "Nothing whatsoever. I've seen more fat on an Unggoy house slave." She deposited the child back on the ground.

A quick nudge from her hoof thawed the human from his stupor. The boy stumbled backwards, twisted and scrambled from the alley.

"No sense in leaving one alive" Ahrmonree said. She raised her beam rifle, Falshree following suit with her own weapon.

"No don't!" Nakitee said waving them down.

"Why?" Falshree hissed.

"Veskeriee records all ammunition expenditure. If she finds out we wasted fresh plasma on a human whelp, let's just say it will be unpleasant for all involved. Use a blade."

Ahrmonree looked at her sceptically, her brow furrowing in confusion, "Why didn't you use your own?"

"And befoul my armour with that little abominations blood" Nakitee hissed, "I'd prefer not to sister. It's hardly going to slit my throat in the night."

"Probably couldn't even reach the bed" Falshree chuckled.

Ahrmonree paused, her rifle still sighted on the human youth. From the edge of her peripheral vision Nakitee knew the human was almost at the edge of the alley, but he could still be cut down with just one flick of the sharpshooter's clawed forefinger.

"Where did you hear about Veskeriee?" Tasmansee asked.

"Rumours" Nakitee shrugged, "They've been floating around the barracks ever since we arrived. I didn't know if they were true or not, though evidently we're likely soon going to find out."

Tasmansee glanced at her sidearm, resignedly shaking her head, "Something to look forward to at least. Always best to learn your Commander's moods early."

"And from a distance" Ahrmonree added as she lowered her rifle, "Come, before she starts looking for us."

The four Sangheili females moved back towards the square, regrouping with the rest of the lance. Nakitee climbed back into the armoured Shadow transport and the convoy departed to resume its patrol for that morning.

\* \* \*

><p>The encounter with the Covenant elites had shaken Alex to his core. His legs carried him safely from the alleyway and the towering

alien warriors, and once he was safely tucked away where no one could see they failed him.<p>

Alex curled himself into a ball inside a vacant doorway, fighting to control his shaking limbs. Every time he regained control of his breathing he heard the blood curdling screams and every time he closed his eyes he saw the jade green blast of light mixed with crimson blood in the snow. Eventually he could not fight it any longer. The nausea overtook him and in that moment and he heaved up the meager contents of his stomach in the doorway.

It was a good few minutes before Alex found the strength to stand on his own two feet, and even then he had to seek the support of the wall. The responsibility that others had placed on his shoulders filled the child with a reserve of strength he never knew he had.

Shakily but with purpose he made his way back towards the alley.

The elites were gone, and Alex found his hidden pack undisturbed in the alcove where he had left it. He avoided the bodies, circling around the market square rather than going through it.

The rest of his journey was mercifully uneventful and with the exception of one of their passing dropship's Alex didn't set eyes on another Covenant soldier.

It was perhaps an hour after his encounter with the elites that Alex reached the old hospital at the edge of the city's southern quarter. It was warm inside the building, though the air was stuffy and mingled with the damp stench of blood. Alex navigated his way through the rag drabbed mass of moaning Carthaginians that packed the forward reception area.

"Alam?" he asked the passing nurses and orderlies, "Doctor Alam?"

"He upstairs" murmured a flustered woman in a tattered lab coat. Kneeling beside an older man, she clicked her fingers towards two orderlies, "Prep him with a quarter of the standard dose then prep him for surgery, quickly now."

Inside the hospital the corridors were packed with the sick and dying. Weak starved humans littered every room. The lucky ones lay on stretchers with perhaps a blanket draped over them while the most forlorn lined the walls and floor moaning for water. Alex made his way up through the hospital, back to the same room he always visited when he came here. He met Alam just outside the room, almost running smack into the dark skinned doctor.

"Is she Ok?"

"She's fine Alex" Alam said raising his hands, "She's safe, go and see her."

Without further greeting Alex handed the pack to the Doctor and entered the hospital ward.

"Alex!"

The young girl was weak, her voice tired but she struggled to sit up, scratching at the feeding tube that pricked her elbow. Finally freeing herself from the tangled blankets she hugged her brother.

"Mum, Dad?"

"There fine Sarah" he lied, "There fine."

"When will they come? It's been so long."

"There'll be here soon Sis" Alex said stroking his sister's cheek, "There'll be here soon."

From the doorway Alam riffled through the pack. Antibiotics, insulin, freshly packaged bioform. The basic essentials that kept the hospital running, if only barely. The Covenant occupation had long ago severed any regular supply shipments to the human hospitals across New Carthage. Now the handful of doctors and nurses remaining were left to beg, borrow and steel everything they could just to keep the hospital functional. The scattered human resistance forces outside the urban centres offered the only source of organized logistics for essential supplies.

Alam hated using children like Alex as the couriers, but what other choice did they have?

He flagged down a passing nurse and handed her the supplies.

"Get these to inventory quickly, and then meet me upstairs. We'll check on the burn victims from last night."

The nurse took the supplies and glanced into the open ward, "His sister?"

Alam nodded, "Poor girl was admitted just before the Covenant fleet breached the system. She was diagnosed with Maltab Syndrome, untreatable and terminal."

The nurse paused behind him, wiping a tear from her eye, "Do they have any other family?"

"Parents have been dead for over a year. The disease affects her memory, she recalls their last moments together, but can't ascertain how much time has passed."

"How long does she have?"

Alam paused, biting his lip, "Six months. She'll never leave this hospital."

The nurse left without a word. Alam watched the two siblings a few minutes longer before leaving to check on his many patients.

It was perhaps an hour later that Alex left the ward, his visit having exhausted his six year old sister back to sleep. Alam met him on the way out, drawing him to the side.

"You're a brave lad son" Alam said, placing his hands on Alex's shoulders, "Now what do you do if the Covenant ever catch you with

the pack?"

"Tell them to go fuck themselves!"

Alam rasped the boys temple with his knuckle, his face deathly serious.

"You tell them my name" he said calmly, "My address, appearance, where I work and the color of my skin. You tell them I gave you the pack, and then you keep your mouth shut."

Alex stared at him, his lips twisted in distaste but slowly shook his head.

"Good lad" Alam said, "Now get back to the orphanage before you're missed."

Alex scarpered out of the hospital. Alam ran his fingers through his hair, dreading the day that it happened. He was not afraid to die, he had seen it all too often, but for the boy to be subjected to pain and torture, he couldn't bare that. He held no illusions about their captor's final solution to the human population of New Carthage, but he had to try.

All he could hope for was that Alex and his sister died a painless death.

#### 4. Chapter 3 - Ambush

**\*\*Chapter 3 â€" Ambush\*\***

**\_\*\*[Except] Post Deployment Personnel Review Of Terrestrial Legionnaire Suka' Nakitee (First Class) by Field Commander San' Galtarshee / Entry 568795/0485043\*\*\_**

\_Legionnaire Suka' Nakitee displays great aptitude for high stress military environments...\_

\_...ambushed by Jiralhanae insurgents during a standard patrol in the Dakaran province. Legionnaire Nakitee returned to the point vehicle which was under intense enemy fire at the time and extracted a wounded sister legionnaire...\_

\_...engaged and killed two Jiralhanae insurgents in hand to hand close quarters combat...\_

\_...recommended Legionnaire Nakitee for advancement into the Special Operations Group effective immediately...\_

\_...Initial training course complete, candidate scored overall tally of 96% in all relevant fields. Her father will be very proud when...\_

\_...strongly recommend you consider for advancement to junior officer rank at later date...\_

\_...dropped out of training at final stage. Stated personnel reasons for voluntary de-selection from the training process. I do not understand her decision...\_

\_...pleaded with me not to inform her parents of her nomination to the Special Operation's Group. Attempted to convince her to resume where she left off but her decision is final, and I will respect it forever how much I disagree with her choice. The Covenant Ground Forces have lost a fine warrior this day...\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Location: Covenant Occupied Human Colony World New Carthage<strong>

\*\*Date: 12 / 02 / 2545 (Human Military Calendar)\*\*

\*\*8 Days after the events of Chapter 2\*\*

\*\*49 Days prior to events of Prologue\*\*

Taia' Korequee had quickly come to despise the human world of Nu Carthage.

It was not the incessant winter blizzards that seemed locked to this blasted world's seasons and nor was it the filthy claustrophobic cities that dotted the prime continent. It was not even the verminous humans themselves that he had come to truly hate these past few rotations.

What the Commander truly despised was the truly absurd twist in logic which dictated that in a crusade spanning hundreds of worlds, two dozen of his Special Operation Brigades should be relegated to mere guard duty on this half frozen rock.

Korequee's Sangheili were the best warriors the military Academies on Sepheria Luminare had produced, perhaps the best in the entire Covenant Empire and yet they were required to wet nurse this patchwork army Penance had thrown together to occupy the human planet.

"â€|the quotas are falling short in every settlementâ€|"

Korequee stirred from his slumber as the golden armoured Sangheili smashed his curled fist down onto raised dais in the centre of the chamber.

"Sector 5 production has fallen by twelve percent in the last fifteen standard rotations" the Field Master continued, his powerful claws curled around a datascroll at his hip, "Sector 7 and 9 have fallen by fifteen percent. Across the entire world we are expecting a cumulative loss of over thirty thousand units of raw materials."

The chamber was a sealed octagon on the eighty first storey of the Central Spire, far beyond the reach of any of the human's improvised missiles or projectiles. The chamber's occupants this day were a mixture of Sangheili and San 'Shyuum military officers, aristocrats and religious officials. The Prophet of Penance was slumped on his bobbling gravity thrown, his eyes wandering the smooth walls while a gnarled hand propped up his chin. Across from the Prophet sat both Fleet Master Talsharnee and High Priestess Ikarshree. Each were attired in their ceremonial robes and armour and both seemed to have lost all interest in the Field Master's ramblings. An assortment of



Jiralhanae mercenaries and private military contractors stood outside the council meeting, their stance a distinct divide from their 'allies.'

Slowly Penance shifted his gaze back to the Field Master, his thin wiry fingers slipping under his cloak, "And can we safely assume Field Master that when such losses are suffered, appropriate punishments are carried out, promptly and efficiently?"

"Every time a work quota is failed we execute a predetermined numbers of humans across each settlement" the Field Master responded, "Each selected human's entire extended family is executed with them."

Korequee snorted. The Field Master glared at him but before he could rebuke the Commander others gave voice to their thoughts.

"So we are butchering the healthiest of our slave labor force" Ikarshree mused, exchanging a mutual glance with Talsharnee as she threaded her claws across her lap, "and the Field Master wonders why production suddenly drops? I fear he is missing something quite obvious."

A chorus of muted chuckles echoed throughout the chamber as the Field Master twisted towards the High Priestess. Unshaken the zealot clicked his lower mandibles in a shrug, "As I remember it was your own recommendation, High Priestess that we limit such executions to the oldest and most infirm of the humans. Statistics have shown our new methods to be much more efficient. These vermin have shown themselves to be much more productive when they believe there is a genuine danger to their immediate family. By wiping out the entire lineage, we neutralize the possibility of any retaliation for executed kin."

"And yet our warrior's still fall victim to ambushes and isolated attacks" Korequee hissed smacking his open palm down on the armrest of his seat, "This indigenous human resistance force continues to strike at our forces across the planet."

"An insurgent human faction in the aftermath of an invasion was always a possibility" Penance cut in with a wave of his hand, "If not a full gone conclusion. While the loss of our warriors is regrettable Commander, suitable retaliations are always carried out against the human population. For now we must address these failed work quotas and their consequent impact on our holy crusade."

From behind Ikarshree a junior priestess rose from her seat, "Perhaps in this affair we have overestimated the human's abilities."

The chamber fell silent as she smoothed down her elaborate robes and headdress, "They are a weak race, unfit for the lowest platforms of the Great Journey. Perhaps we must face the reality that they have reached their physical boundaries, and those boundaries will always be beneath our expectations. The Hierarchs and through them the Holy Forerunners themselves decried their fate after all, complete and utter eradication."

Mummers of agreement filtered from among the gathered officers and nobles, and few raised any dissident to the junior priestess's words. With a nod the Field Master folded his arms as the female retook her

seat, "An accurate assessment" the Field Master began, "This trial has tested our resolve for too long. I put the motion to this council that we should carry out a general order of extermination against the human population of this world. It could be completed in mere days, and we could have a suitable number of Jiralhanae workers here by the end of this world's annual cycle."

The Jiralhanae visibly bristled at this mention of them, fangs grating and fists tightened. The Field Master made no indication that he had noticed the slight he had made, and many voices rose in support of him, but crucially not all of them.

"We have invested far too much in this occupation to see it squandered in such a way" Penance wheezed, waving down further argument with a brush of his long fingered hand, "When the time is right the humans of this world will be dealt with, but we cannot afford any further disruption to the supply of raw materials to the front lines. We must decide on a solution to the problems at hand."

"Does that solution include the guerilla actions against our bases and patrols?" Korequee asked, the heavy Sangheili shifting in his seat as he leant forward.

"As I have already expressed Commander, the loss of our Covenant's sons and daughters is regrettable" Penance replied, his cold blue eyes blinking a warning, "But bears no relevance to the subject this council is discussing."

"With the greatest of respect Excellency" Korequee pressed, "I consider the two to be inexplicably linked."

Penance raised a quizzical eyebrow, "Go on."

Korequee rose to his hooves, stretching his calves and back as all eyes turned towards him. He could almost feel Talsharnee's glare burning into his armour.

"I have received a number of disturbing reports from my field officers over the last few rotations concerning the Jiralhanae's use of captive humans for hunting."

A thickly built Jiralhanae sporting a white mane of hair around his neck pushed through his companions at the edge of the chamber. A sudden glare from Penance halted him, but his fiery eyes did not leave Korequee.

"Surely you would not deny your allies their sport Commander" the Jiralhanae Chieftain replied, shifting his eyes imploringly to the seated Sangheili and San 'Shyuum. "The right of the hunt is a sacred tradition upon my Homeworld, fully recognized and endorsed by the High Council. As a member species of the Holy Covenant is one of our most basic and sacrosanct rights."

"The legality of your hunts is not my concern" Korequee retorted, "But their subsequent repercussions are."

"Repercussions?" the Chieftain snorted dismissively, "Our prey never survives the hunt, of that I assure you. Whether by plasma, bludgeon or the fang they all die."

"But their relatives are left alive" Korequee snapped back as he turned towards the Prophet of Penance, "And thanks to the remains our 'allies' see fit to leave behind quite literally untraceable. Each surviving kin of the slain is a possible insurgent for the human resistance. Each one of their 'sports' puts our warriors in greater danger."

The Jiralhanae visibly straightened at this blatant accusation, his fang filled maw opening to speak but Penance waived him to silence.

"The Commander raises a valid point Vorackus", Penance mused as he turned back towards the Jiralhanae, "And a very grave threat to our security. From this day forward these hunts end. I want you to personally stamp out any such activities, is that clear?"

The Chieftain whose name was Vorackus was silent for a moment, his features twisted in a silent brooding rage but after a few moments he un-furrowed his brow, "As you wish Excellency."

A fleeting moment of calm and silence returned to the chamber.

Bobbing atop his gravity throne, Penance turned back towards the golden armoured Sangheili he had been addressing earlier, "Field Master Satoroque, let us hope these actions will remedy this situation. In the meantime, double the number of humans executed for each failed quota."

\* \* \*

><p>It was several hours later that the council session concluded and Korequee was able to escape the tedious duties of his rank. Nursing his sore neck the Sangheili rose from his seat and made his way past the congregation of his chattering kin and through the open doorway.<p>

Ikarshree ambushed him as he strode towards the Spire's main promenade, appearing at his side seemingly from nowhere. With a smile the priestess grasped his arm in her smooth claws, guiding him from the crowd of departing officers and officials.

It was with a tired curiosity that Korequee allowed himself to be led to one of the promenades many verandas where a granite bench provided a stunning view of the distant human mountains.

"It would appear you've made an enemy this day Commander" Ikarshree said, gesturing back towards the open council chamber. Korequee glanced in the direction she was indicating. On the raised steps he saw the Jiralhanae Chieftain emerge, one of the last to leave. By his side was another Jiralhanae of slightly smaller stature, his fur was auburn brown but he carried no obvious tribal rankings.

"It's an occupational hazard of my career" Korequee replied, "He'll have to join the queue."

Ikarshree chuckled softly, massaging her lower mandibles.

The veranda had not been built as a hiding place, but the artificial

trees that formed the enclosure made it an ideal spot for someone who wanted to sit and eavesdrop on passing parties.

"Who is he?"

"The larger of the two's name is Vorackus" Ikarshree replied, "His rank is, how would I describe it, superficial. He was exiled from Doisac cycles ago after a failed coup. Reputably even his own tribe has a bounty on his head. Just his head. Not his body."

Korequee paused, watching as the Chieftain began to descend the promenade steps himself, his young adjutant in tow.

"Then he's in no position to be making enemies."

"On the contrary Commander" Ikarshree said, "Vorackus is alive today because he has made enemies. Penance uses him as his enforcer for silencing problems. His entire makeshift pack is comprised of the worst individuals you could imagine, Jiralhanae who were cast out by their own tribes. The one by his side is Krausx, reputably Vorackus's adopted nephew. He killed the son of a Sangheili councilor, its rumored he did it to gain acceptance among Vorackus's pack."

"You and Penance" Korequee reflected as he turned towards the lithe priestess, "You virtually run this world between you. Is Vorackus solely his enforcer, or yours as well?"

Ikarshree smiled, white teeth flashing in the sunlight behind her mandibles as she lifted her claw like hands to her hips, "Vorackus has his uses Commander, but I would not consider such a blunt instrument as himself an asset. When it comes to silencing problems, I have more subtle yet direct methods."

"Then why are you telling me this?"

"Vorackus usefulness is almost at an end" Ikarshree replied, her deep green eyes were suddenly cold and her voice had lost the warmth with which she had first spoken, "Let us just say that like the humans of this world, his lifespan can now be measured in days, not cycles."

On the promenade the two Jiralhanae passed by their veranda seemingly unaware of the conversation taking place. Korequee watched as the two of them bordered the gravity lift on the main level and disappeared down the glimmering chute.

"If he has outlasted his usefulness, why need I concern myself?"

"For that very reason exactly, Commander" Ikarshree replied, "Vorackus likely suspects his mutual relationship with the Prophet is about to come to a rather unhealthy and unnatural end. With an entire battalion of loyal Jiralhanae sociopaths behind him and outwardly nothing to lose, I would watch your back Commander."

Korequee kept silent as he mulled over her words, considering the very literal stinging nest he had landed in on this cursed world. Without a further word Ikarshree departed, making her way back towards the Spire's main temple.

"Whose side are you on priestess?" he called after her.

Ikarshree paused, the sole of one hoof poised beneath her draping robes.

"Side?" she queried, tasting the word on her tongue. "The Forerunners of course, you over think these things Commander."

Korequee watched the beautiful female leave, the high altitude gently buffeting her robes as she walked away. Her raw strength reminded him of another female, another life ago.

There was no doubt about it.

He hated everything about this world.

\* \* \*

><p>"Checkmate, this is castle. Geese are in season. I say again, geese are in season."<p>

\_The convoy was on approach\_

Major Connor paused at the edge of the plaza, the rest of his fire team doing there best to melt into the passing crowd, their ballistic vests and small arms obscured under a motley assortment of trench-coats, heavy jackets and civilian jumpsuits.

Passing through the moving crowd Connor reached up to scratch at his scalp, casually brushing his thumb over the hidden comm.'s bead in his ear.

"Checkmate, this is castle responding. ETA on the geese's position?"

"Five eggs Castle."

\_Five minutes\_

Connor glanced upwards, taking stock of the low rise factory buildings which boarded the plaza, their industrial outline shielding his eyes from the burning sun high above. Somewhere on the factory's rooftops Martinez, his pathfinders and two marine fire-team's backed up equal number of local Novagonian insurgents were setting up Anti-Aircraft nests and fall back points, preparing for what was to come.

"This is Castle to all groundside teams, confirm your current status."

"This is Bishop" Barker responded, "Status ripe."

"This is Rook" Chaucer responded, "Status also ripe."

Connor took a deep breath, closing his eyes for just a moment as he steeled himself against what had to be done. When the bullets started flying there would be no turning back.

Opening his eyes Connor surveyed the passing crowd. The Central plaza was perhaps the largest public space left in Novago, and even in

these dark days of what was likely the city's final weeks, there was something reassuring that so many humans still passed through the square freely. Twisting his gaze over his shoulder Connor glimpsed Chaucer's face in the human press and knew her fighters were close by.

He had three severely under strength fire-teams supported by an equal number of indigenous Novagonian insurgents at ground level, thirty five men and women including himself. From the rooftops another twenty three resistance fighters watched and waited, ready to provide covering fire if needed.

They would need every single one of them to pull this off.

Dispensing with any further doubts Connor changed direction, making his way through the human crowd and towards the plaza's far edge, his fire support team following closely behind.

"This is Checkmate" Martinez reported from up high, "We have visual of geese."

"Confirm numbers" Connor replied.

There was a pause and Connor could hear hushed whispers on the receiving end of his lead path finder's radio. He bit his lower lip, about to repeat the order when his comm.'s bead crackled back to life in his ear.

"Four!"

"Checkmate please repeat" Connor replied, "Reconfirm number."

"There's four Castle" Martinez repeated, "Only four."

"Shit!" Connor muttered under his breath, \_There were suppose to be twelve.\_

"Convoy now entering view" Chaucer reported.

At the very edge of the plaza Connor saw them. Four armoured Shadow transports escorted by two patrol Spectre's skimming down the boulevard and into the plaza's adjacent side street.

"Thirty seconds" Barker hissed over the comm.'s, "Gear up people, lock and load."

"Castle" Martinez voiced hurriedly, "We've got a Covenant foot patrol approaching the square from the east side."

"God damn it" Connor muttered, "Bishop delay that order. Checkmate what are you looking at?"

"Grunts" Martinez replied, "Jackal's and elites. Platoon strength at least, plus support units, moving towards the square."

"All teams prepare to engage" Barker ordered, "Weapons live, twenty seconds."

"Negative Bishop stand down" Connor hissed, "Mission is scrubbed."

"We're doing this Major" Barker growled through gritted teeth, "We've invested too much to back out now."

"Bishop you will stand down and await orders" Connor seethed. The Covenant convoy was halfway down the street now. In another fifteen seconds they'd clear the junction at the end of the road and be out of the plaza completely. Connor tapped his comm.'s bead again. Silence filled the line.

"Pawn" Barker radioed suddenly, "Engage!"

The ambush kicked off just as they'd planned.

A civilian modelled Warthog sped across the junction lancing in front of the Covenant convoy, its gears screaming as the driver executed a handbrake turn arcing his vehicle across the intersection at the edge of the street. The Covenant hovercraft swerved to avoid the collision, the bulbous Shadow transports and sleek Spectre's spearing out along the road, one of two of them grating their smooth hulls on the pavement.

The driver scrambled out of his seat even as the Covenant soldiers, huge swarthy brutes were emerging from their own vehicles. The thickly built aliens were gesturing angrily, barking unintelligible yet undeniably brutal threats at who they no doubt assumed to be a lowly human civilian flouting the transport ban.

This was it. They were committed.

\_Damn you Barker!\_

"Move" Connor shouted, the crowd around him parting as he pulled free his MA5B battle rifle, "All units engage!" he screamed into his comm.'s bead.

A missile streaked down from the rooftops and scored a direct hit on the lead Spectre. With a deafening explosion the dozen or so brutes scrambled for cover as their lead vehicle went up in a plume of pressurised flames whilst a hail of small arms fire slammed straight into their convoy.

The human crowd reeled back from the square in terror as the brutes returned fire, their shots sporadic as if they were unsure as to exactly where their attackers were.

The human troops seized the initiative. Connor's marines and former constabulary officers surged through the writhing mob, emerging across the open plaza to pin the Covenant brutes under their interlocking fields of fire.

Connor dived forward as a burst of luminous blue plasma flashed past his helmet. Three yards away a fleeing woman screamed as a lancing beam of energy sliced through her chest and sent the civilian tumbling to the ground in a vicious spectacle of spurting arterial blood and flaying limbs.

Connor's tucked his head into his chest as his shoulder struck the

ground. Cart wheeling into a text book military crouch he snapped his rifle up and fired stitching a Covenant brute with a three round burst across the chest. The alien was between cover and went down hard. Dead or wounded he wouldn't be getting up soon.

"Contacts, contacts" screamed one of his marines. Connor risked a glance over his shoulder knowing that his cover was non-existent. In one fleeting second he saw what his panicked marines were seeing, and his worst fears were confirmed.

Covenant troops stormed into the square. Dozens of grunts, some lugging heavy plasma cannons. Jackal's with carbines and portable wrist gauntlets, and at least thirty elites. Martinez had been if anything optimistic in his assessment, this wasn't a platoon, it was a whole company.

"Covering fire" Connor screamed, watching as two of his marines were cut down in a hail of scorching plasma. The surviving humans dropped to their bellies and returned fire, doing their best to minimize their profiles as the Covenant hosed down the plaza. From the corner of his eye Connor could see scores of fleeing civilians being gunned down with indiscriminate fury, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

"Martinez we need covering fire" he shouted loosing a burst of fire at the oncoming grunts.

"Moving to support" Martinez radioed back, "Be aware, Covenant air support has been sighted."

"Acknowledged."

He dropped a grunt with a single shot to the head, the alien punching backwards with a sickening lurch.

The Covenant were responding faster than he'd believed possible. If their gunship's appeared above the human resistance fighters while they were pinned down by the Covenant ground troops they'd be massacred.

He had to get this rolled up fast.

"Leah, chap a squad to my flank, double time!"

"There on their way" Leah replied, "Thompson keep those bastards pinned" she screamed over the gunfire.

"Leah, Barker, prepare to advance on targets" Connor shouted. He was firing his rifle one handed now, his other hand dipping into the backpack over his shoulder. His fingers found the strap and with bullets and plasma flying all around him Connor pulled the heavy satchel charge from his pack.

\_Barker, I'll kill you for this!\_

\* \* \*

><p>"Contacts sighted. Engage!" Veskeriee yelled.<p>

Primitive human projectiles and explosives rained down on the side



street like hailstones cutting down anything that loitered in the open a moment to long.

Nakitee cursed their heathen race with all the venom her soul could muster as she sprinted across the plaza's edge, Falshree and two other Terrestrials hard on her heels. The four Sangheili took cover beneath a crudely bricked archway as plasma weapons and slug throwers let loose all around them.

Sweeping her carbine around the street corner Nakitee squeezed of a volley of lancing plasma beams towards the plaza where the majority of the humans muzzle fire seemed to be grouped. Without pause Nakitee ducked back behind the wall as a torrent of propelled metallic slugs smashed into the brickwork a second later.

"The vermin will burn for this!" one of the Sangheili hissed from behind.

"At least they finally show the courage to face us" Falshree shouted over the roiling gunfire, "I was getting board with them not shooting back."

The female fixed Nakitee's friend with a cold glare, "You're enjoying this aren't you?"

Across the street Nakitee watched as a handful of Unggoy led by three Terrestrial's tried to make a break from cover and advance on the square. Human small arms fire zeroed in on them from both ground level and up high. The auxiliary Unggoy died in droves whilst one of the Sangheili screamed as a high powered gauss round tore straight through her energy shielding and punched a fist sized hole in her shoulder. Veskeriee appeared from the thick smog that now choked the street and dragged the wounded soldier to cover.

"Ahrmonree what do you see?" the veteran shouted.

"Sharp shooters spread along the rooftops" the sniper shouted back. Nakitee glimpsed the sniper a few paces ahead crouched behind the burnt out shell of a human motor vehicle.

"Two, maybe three squads plus fire support" Ahrmonree continued, "Heavy weapons and explosive launchers."

Veskeriee popped up from behind her cover faster than Nakitee thought possible and loosed a salvo from her storm rifle. Nakitee followed her commander's arc of fire and saw at least two human shaped figures in the plaza lurch back in a spurting haze of crimson blood.

They'd been running between cover and she'd hit them both.

"We have to reach the convoy or their dead" Veskeriee shouted as she ducked back behind her cover.

"Let them die" someone retorted, "Their Jiralhanae, scum!"

"Silence" Veskeriee roared, "Tasmansee take control of the rearguard and lay down covering fire, concentrate your heavy weapons on the rooftops. Ahrmonree take two fourunit's and a support squad of Kig-yar and flank them, try to pin down their troops in the plaza. The rest of us will make a push for the convoy."

"This will be bloody" Zakamee warned.

"We have no choice" Veskeriee shouted, "Move!"

Thirty Sangheili backed by over a hundred Unggoy and Kig-yar auxiliaries broke out of the street.

Even with the support of Tasmansee and the other Terrestrial heavy weapon specialists the plaza was a killing ground. The Unggoy as usual took the brunt of punishment, the human's small arms fire tearing a fair number of them to pieces as the Covenant soldiers pushed into the square. The Kig-yar did their best to cover the advance, shielding their comrades with their oval wrist gauntlets yet a fair number still fell to concentrated projectile fire. Nakitee dived and rolled as a burst of human bullets raked her shields. The Sangheili took refuge behind a shattered market stool, Zakamee rolling into cover beside her, the female's seldom used Needler clasped over her gauntlet.

They had a clear site of the convoy now. The Jiralhanae were putting up a worthy fight, yet even with their attending Unggoy Nakitee could see that less than a dozen still stood. Many were wounded and the humans were pouring down fire on them from all quarters.

"I can't see the insurgents" Zakamee shouted, "They are among the crowd."

Nakitee glanced over the market stool's edge. Zakamee was right. Despite the warzone the plaza had become hundreds of humans still packed the square. Some sheltered in shell holes or whatever meagre cover they could find while others scrambled aimlessly about the square trying to avoid the crossfire. Every now and again Nakitee would glimpse a flash of metal as one of the human guerrillas raised a gun and fired in her direction, but then they were back among their kin indistinguishable from the crowd.

It made it next to impossible for the Sangheili to identify and single out any of the armed human combatants.

"All Units" Veskeriee's voice cracked over the comm.'s, "Target every human in the square. No exceptions!"

Nakitee hesitated, Zakamee swearing beside her. She knew they were at war with the humans. She knew the Hierarch's had decreed their races complete and utter extermination, but something inside her rallied against the order.

Only a fraction of the humans were armed, there would be weaklings among them, young children surely. But still they were at war with them, and even now the human combatants poured fire on her lance and their allies, her fellow Sangheili, her sisters, her friends.

It took Nakitee a marginally longer fraction of time to quash her doubt than a great many of her fellow Terrestrials and their auxiliary troops, but the end result was the same.

The Covenant troops returned fire, hosing the plaza down with everything they had and making no distinction between human civilian and insurgent. Nakitee shouldered her carbine and opened fire,

watching as scores of humans were cut down before her.

The enemy's return fire diminished but did not cease entirely, and if anything the number of surviving human marksmen targeting the convoy increased. Nakitee saw a Jiralhanae pitch backwards in a spurting fountain of arterial blood as human heavy machinegun fire nailed him to the wall.

"No!" Zakamee screamed, pitching towards her hooves. Nakitee stopped her before Zakamee could make a sprint to the wounded contractor, all but tackling the medic back to the ground.

"He may still be alive" Zakamee shouted.

"And if you die so will he" Nakitee shouted back.

Zakamee fumed and for a moment Nakitee feared she would have a fight on her hands however the medic returned to her firing position, loosing a few shots from her Needler.

Most of the human fire from the square had subsided as those insurgents still alive became pinned down between Ahrmonree's sharp shooters and Veskeriee's flanking attack. Nakitee switched her aim to the rooftops where a great number of the humans still raked the plaza with fire. Catching one of the alien's in her crosshairs Nakitee's clawed forefinger curled around her carbines trigger. She caught the human with a lancing beam shot straight through its throat, toppling the alien from the protective wall that capped the rooftop.

"There" someone shouted.

Nakitee averted her aim, glimpsing movement. Across the square a small number of humans sprinted from cover and made a beeline straight for the scattered convoy. Covenant small arms fire whistled around the charging humans yet their surviving companions on the rooftops still commanded the high ground and together they laid down a withering cascade of small calibre and missile fire, covering their comrade's suicidal advance.

Cursing the human's illogical barbarity Nakitee snapped her carbine to her shoulder, scanning the rooftops for a target. She need not have bothered.

Heavy covenant plasma rounds smashed into the building, scattering the humans like leaves in the wind. Nakitee hissed vehemently as she tore her eyes away from her carbine's scope, momentarily dazed.

"Phantom's" Zakamee screamed with excitement as she thrust her gloved hand into the air. Nakitee followed the medic's claw like forefinger, catching site of the bulbous gunships outlines against the morning sun. There heavy plasma turrets swivelled towards square, drenching the entrenched humans with a deadly volley of high yield plasma rounds.

Nakitee rose from her cover and glanced towards the billowing smoke that now obscured the plaza's edge. Incredulously two of the humans emerged from the churning haze undeterred and dived beneath the Shadow transports.

\* \* \*

><p>The warriors of the Special Operation's Group had been waiting for this.<p>

Juha' Relusee glanced over the edge of the Phantom's troop bay, one hand clasped on the Unggoy support gunner's shoulder, the other curled around the plasma rifle at his hip.

The humans had finally decided to fight!

"This is it?" Tasolmee asked dubiously from beside him, "By the convoy distress call you would think that they were almost overrun."

"Jiralhanae and terrestrials" Texlusee hissed with a dismissive wave of her claws, "What did you expect from primates and part time warriors?"

Kilshree and the four other Special Operations Sangheili crammed into the Phantom's hold chuckled at the female's remark.

Truth be told Relusee could already see the human ambush had failed. Only a handful of isolated human pockets remained scattered about the square, pinned down by the terrestrial legionnaires. Now as the three Phantom gunships poured fire and death down on the alien snipers along the plaza's surrounding rooftops from above, the human's position looked increasingly bleak.

Still, one could never be too careful.

Relusee touched a talon like finger to his helm, "Fourunit's three and five take the rooftops" he ordered, "Four and six you'll be dropping down with us. We'll be moving in to support the terrestrials northern flank attack. Acknowledge orders."

Sixteen Sangheili warriors rune's flashed in his helms retina display. Relusee twisted down towards the Unggoy support gunner by his side.

"Ignore the humans on the rooftops and concentrate your fire on those in the square. Understand?"

"Yes Excellency" the diminutive alien cried.

"Good grunt" Relusee replied, giving the Unggoy slave soldier a reassuring thump in the small of its back. Human slang may have been a blasphemous perversion of more civilised tongues, but certain words from their language had proved heretically infectious among the Covenant ranks.

"Finally" Tasolmee brawled from behind him as he thumbed open the Phantom's gravity iris, "Time for some fun."

Relusee leapt into the gravity lift, Tasolmee, Texlusee, Kilshree and the rest of the Sangheili Special Operation warrior's right behind him.

The familiar sense of weightless vertigo swept past him as he drifted freefall down the gravity chute, and then his hooves touched down on

the human plaza below.

"Move, move, move!" Relusee bellowed.

Sporadic human gunfire ricocheted around them as Relusee, Tasolmee, Texlusee and Relusee dived to their stomachs and returned fire, their fellow warriors sprinting for cover. Texlusee cut down two armed humans in quick succession while Tasolmee all but ripped a third apart with his Focus rifle. With drilled efficiency their fellow fourunit took up position behind a human storage hut and laid down covering fire allowing Relusee's own companions in turn to push up the human's flank and find their own cover. The two fourunit's continued their pattern of alternating dash and cover until they reached the terrestrial legionnaires at the far end of the plaza.

"Who's in command here?" Relusee shouted over the heavy swoosh and of crackle of Covenant plasma and human small arms fire.

"That would be me" replied a slimly built Sangheili female, "Legionnaire Ahrmonree, squad leader, terrestrial first class."

"Figure's" Texlusee chorused from beside him as she snapped up over the barricade and caught a third human with a lancing beam to the chest. Tasolmee ducked down beside them with the sharp shooter to his immediate right and another female terrestrial to his left. If Ahrmonree took offense at Texlusee's little dig, she didn't show it.

"What's the current situation?" Relusee asked.

"The humans kicked off their ambush just as we were entering the plaza" Ahrmonree replied, ducking her head down just as a hail of human projectiles peppered the area around them, "Blocked off a logistics convoy then took out the escorts with missiles. Our lance tried to flank them from both angles and pin them down but they had snipers on the rooftops."

"Have they tried to withdraw?"

Ahrmonree shook her head, "The verminous little pink skins are proving unusually stubborn. We must have killed over half of them but their dug in like a Talakreche skin-rash. They must know they can't breach the Shadows hull's with their missiles, their armour's too thick."

Relusee knew the humans better than that, this wasn't a random insurgent attack. This had been a planned ambush with a legitimate target in mind, the convoy. The humans wouldn't risk a prolonged shootout unless they still believed they had a chance of destroying the armoured Shadow's. Their conventional missiles wouldn't do it, and neither would their grenades.

"Falshree!"

Tasolmee's sudden outburst distracted Relusee from his trail of thought. Turning he saw the thickly built warrior and the female terrestrial beside him had stopped firing and were staring at each other in momentary surprise.

What was he doing?

Relusee stared at the female. She seemed familiar to him, but where had he seen her?

The tavern back on Sepheria Luminare!

\_Ancient Maker\_ Relusee thought, \_What were the odds?\_

"Tasolmee" Texlusee shouted breaking them all out of their momentary trance, "Impregnate her later, fight now!"

"Forerunners Grace" Tasolmee laughed as he returned fire over the barricade, his onetime love interest hammering away with her own storm rifle beside him, "This day just keeps getting better and better."

"Sappers" Relusee realized suddenly, "Their making a direct run on the convoy."

"What?" Ahrmonree hissed.

"Kilshree with me" Relusee said, "The rest of you hold your position here."

Before the terrestrial squad leader could repeat her question Relusee was sprinting back across the plaza's edge, Kilshree hard on his hooves. By the time they reached the adjacent side street where the convoy was scattered both Sangheili were driven to cover by the increased human small arms fire which seemed to zero in on them from nowhere.

"We should really burn a warning rune on Tasolmee armour" Kilshree panted, "Me and you hold him down, and Texlusee plasma burns it onto his breast plate."

Relusee wasn't listening. His attention was on the closest Shadow. They were so close.

"Relusee?" Kilshree asked.

"Cover me."

Without waiting for a response Relusee took off at a run, moving straight for the convoy. A dead Jiralhanae was crouched against the first Shadow, his chest a ruined mess of human gunshot wounds.

He was perhaps twenty paces away when he saw them, two human male's standing watch beside the Phantom transport whilst a third was crawling out from beneath the transport, a female.

He knew it!

Relusee killed the first human male with a single plasma round to the head. The second human twisted towards him and stitched his Relusee's energy shields with a three round burst from his rifle. Relusee dropped him with a return shot, two plasma bolts to the chest and one to the head. He angled his rifle towards the female to fire, and missed.

Relusee would have sworn if he'd had time. The shot had been perfect, but the human female had been in the process of twisting the face him, and his plasma bolt glanced off her flak vest. He was already in the process of readjusting his aim as the female raised her submachine gun one handed and fired.

The solid slug projectiles stripped his already weakened shields to their bare reserves. Warning lights flickered across Relusee's helm. With a curse he threw himself into the cover of a human market stall, giving his shields their precious few seconds to recharge.

As he emerged from cover he saw the human female dashing away from the Shadow, her back exposed. She was fast, faster then he would have given most humans credit for.

Relusee raised his plasma rifle, taking site of the human female. She was the verge of his effective range, fast but not fast enough.

The satchel charge the human insurgent had planted exploded there and then, lifting the first of the armoured Shadow transports into a plume of flaming wreckage. The explosion didn't kill Relusee, but it stripped his freshly recovered energy shielding bare and almost tore the plasma rifle from his grasp, his shot going wide.

A single stray human bullet then tore through the seal of his combat harness and punched straight through Relusee's ribcage. As blood pooled inside and out of his body the Special Operation's Sangheili slumped to his knees, his single lung struggling not to collapse under the weight of his internal bleeding.

With a last agonizing breath Relusee keeled over and lost consciousness.

\* \* \*

><p>Suka' Nakitee had seen the Special Operation's Sangheili brave the human fire to reach the convoy, and as the first Shadow transport exploded she had watched him fall.<p>

Wounded or dead, she could not say for certain which.

The humans had used sappers where their missiles and grenades had failed, charging head on into the convoy and planting shaped explosives manually. Now the Shadow transports were going up one by one, each thunderous explosion showing the plaza with flaming debris.

In the face of overwhelming force, the savages had proved irritably resourceful. Suka couldn't tell if she hated or admired them for that.

"Nakitee" Veskeriee appeared beside her, the veteran crouching low, her storm rifle gripped tightly in her gauntlets, "We've got a wounded Spec Ops in the street. The others are going to lay down covering fire while we retrieve him, watch for fire from the rooftops."

"I saw him fall" Nakitee replied, "He may already be dead."

Veskeriee shook her head, "Explosion nullified his shields and a human bullet punctured his combat seal. It'll be a deep flesh wound only, he's still alive."

"Yes Excellency" Nakitee responded, ejecting a spent cartridge from her carbine and slotting a new one home. This had been her first taste of combat against the humans, and it had been like nothing she had expected.

"Move" Veskeriee roared.

The two Sangheili vaunted the market stall. Veskeriee was already in front of her as their sister legionnaires laid down a volley of withering plasma fire to cover them. Nakitee and Veskeriee pounded forward zigzagging the sporadic human fire that peppered the street around them.

A human bullet smacked into Nakitee's thighguard, her protective shields flaring as the barrier deflected the round and almost knocking Nakitee off her hooves in the process. Veskeriee gripped the stumbling Sangheili by her forearm and pulled her too without breaking stride.

The wounded Special Operations Sangheili was bleeding onto the plaza when they came upon him. Veskeriee fired her storm rifle one handed whilst she help helped Nakitee support the injured warrior with her other. Together they hauled him back towards the cover of the market stalls.

Behind their improvised barrier Zakamee was tending to an injured Jiralhanae who had been dragged from the flaming wreckage of the convoy. All traces of the female's earlier nervousness seemed to have evaporated as she disposed with the dead and fought to try and keep the dying alive.

"The humans are disengaging" Ahrmonree reported, "The vermin are fleeing back towards the buildings."

"We must cleanse their structures" Veskeriee ordered, "Tasmansee move up to support. Ahrmonree pursue and engage, we'll take them on the flanks and catch them in a pincer movement."

"As you command, Excellency."

Across the plaza Nakitee could see the humans were falling back. Their numbers were less than she expected by the sheer volume of fire the aliens had been pouring down on them. She countered no more than two dozen fleeing towards the buildings on the plaza's far end. On the rooftops she could see Special Operations warriors storming the entrenched human positions. Two Phantoms had taken up position to support the Sangheili warriors and by all indications the fighting that was taking place up there was among the fiercest in the square.

"Warriors" Veskeriee shouted, "Pursue the humans, hunt them down and exterminate them!"

The terrestrial legionnaires and their supporting Kig-yar and Unggoy stormed across the square, a handful holding their positions to



defend Zakamee and the other medically trained Sangheili as they tended to the wounded.

Veskeriee led the charge across the battle strewn square and over the adjacent side street. She smashed through the first doorway shoulder first as the Covenant troops stormed into the building behind her. Inside the drab human structure the terrestrial legionnaires fanned out clearing each room in turn. With a mental afterthought Nakitee activated her night vision retina, her helm illuminating the gloomy store rooms and winding corridors.

There was movement ahead. Squat ugly creatures piled into the corridor before them.

"Movement!" someone shouted.

In that fleeting moment humans and Sangheili twisted to face each other. Weapons were raised as Nakitee caught full sight of the vermin, and then all hell broke loose.

Scorching plasma and ionized particle beams were met with the heavy chatter of human projectile weapons.

Nakitee ducked into the nearest doorway as tracer fire stitched the wall beside her. Jarring out from behind her cover she caught a human in the sight of her carbine and fired, the lancing beam punched straight through the creature's abdomen and in the darkness she saw crimson blood splash against the walls.

"They have the main approach covered" Veskeriee shouted. With a sharp crack of her claws Veskeriee separated out a couple of the Sangheili legionnaires, "You two, keep them pinned down. The rest of us will peel out, circle around and take them from the flanks."

The two nominated Sangheili and the remaining Kig-yar laid down a hail of covering fire with their plasma and storm rifles as the terrestrials fanned out to either side of the corridor. Veskeriee led three Sangheili including Nakitee and twice as many Unggoy into the next room. There they came to a junction with two doors separated by an antiquated fireplace. Veskeriee and one terrestrial took the door to the right whilst Nakitee, four Unggoy and the remaining terrestrial took the door on the left.

They entered a large storeroom, its floor mostly empty barring a small number of stacked shipping crates and a pile of discarded rubble. The crunch of glass under their hooves halted both Sangheili in their tracks. The Unggoy paused uncertainly, nervously fingering their plasma pistols.

Human tracer fire tore through the far wall raking the storeroom with projectiles. Nakitee rolled to the ground as the bullets whizzed past her helm. Two of the Unggoy were killed instantly as heavy calibre rounds tore through their meagre armour, the second terrestrial letting out a blood curdling scream as human small arms fire stripped down her shielding and tore straight through her thigh.

"Their firing through the walls" Nakitee screamed into her comm.'s bead.

The door on the far side of the storeroom smashed open, two humans

suddenly emerging from the corridor behind, their rifles raised. Nakitee dropped the first with her carbine, her supporting Unggoy scattering in fear as the second ducked and rolled nimbly dodging her next shot.

Before Nakitee could draw a bead on him the human charged her, a metal bayonet strapped to the barrel of his crude firearm.

Nakitee back stepped the human's first thrust, dropping her carbine as she snagged the nozzle of the rifle between her arm and breastplate, and in the darkness she engaged in a violent scuffle with the human. Igniting the plasma blade in her wrist gauntlet Nakitee made a counter swipe at the human's throat. The alien blocked her thrust with an elbow to her forearm. Taking full advantage of her superior strength and size Nakitee forced the human back and crushed it against the wall. A metallic combat knife suddenly appeared in the human's other hand as he made a downward cut for the chest that her personnel shield deflected. The deadly brawl pressed on for a few more agonizing seconds before Nakitee clamped her free hand over the human's throat. Her claw like thumb pieced his jugular whilst one of her long gloved fingers stabbed down between his brow and eyeball. The human let out one last rasping scream as she crushed its windpipe in her grasp.

Finally the human went limp and she laid the small creature to the ground, dead.

"The humans are routing" Veskeriee shouted over the internal comm.'s, "All units report."

"Banshee's have arrived" someone reported, "Their washing the ambush site with plasma. No return fire I repeat, no return fire."

Scooping up her carbine Nakitee proceeded towards her groaning sister, the two surviving Unggoy emerging from their hiding holes to secure the room.

Kneeling down Nakitee began to swathe the terrestrial's wounded leg with med-gel.

"All units secure the area" Veskeriee ordered, "Reinforcements are on their way."

\* \* \*

><p>The Covenant descended on the Carthaginian central plaza in short order, a full attack squadron of Phantom gunships supported by dozens of Banshee interceptors flocking above the square. Within an hour of the first shot being fired the surrounding city blocks were swarming with almost half a Covenant field legion.<p>

Hopelessly outnumbered, outmanoeuvred and outgunned, the human insurgents went to ground. Resistance cells dispersed throughout the city, squads scattering far and wide.

It was every soldier for themselves.

The Covenant hunted Connor's former combat platoon relentlessly, hounding the fatigued human marines like animals. Company sized detachments of jackals and elites supported by towering armoured

hunters stormed the city streets whilst snipers patrolled every rooftop.

Connor led his battered and beleaguered troops into a headlong retreat, scrambling from one hiding place to the next as they desperately tried to avoid the closing net of Covenant troops. His squads regrouped at the eastern creek bed at the edge of the city. There they slipped into the filthy freezing water of the canal and cut across the business district of Novago, slipping out of the former docks towards the lake. It was the following morning that the sodden and exhausted soldiers trudged their way across the frozen mudflats and quick marched up to the protective canopy of the surrounding rainforest. It took Connor's troops another six hours to loop their way back towards the city and the disused chemical plant that served as their safe house.

The moment Connor glimpsed Barker, he saw red.

Thrusting his battle rifle into Sergeant Anderson's chest, Anderson dropped his pack and went straight for the meaty police sergeant.

"You Bastard!" he shouted, swinging at the burly Carthaginian with both fists. Barker twisted to face him and blocked the Major's intended punch with his forearm before Connor jabbed forward with his other fist and landed a solid blow to Constable's stomach.

The two officers grappled, Barker landing a powerful kick to his upper thigh while Connor tackled him backwards and pinned him to the wall.

"Why?" Connor all but screamed in Barker's face, "There'll kill hundreds of us for this, thousands!"

"They were dead anyway" Barker growled, "We were all dead the moment your UNSC chums decided to jack ship and run."

A powerful arm hooked around Connor's throat and hauled him backwards in a chokehold. Cursing profanely Connor glimpsed Chaucer from the corner of his eye. The Lieutenant forced him back from Barker with surprising strength.

"You two trying to kill each other won't help anyone" the Lieutenant shouted as she manoeuvred herself between them. Connor made another attempt at Barker but Chaucer pushed him back with a hand to his chest.

"We can't let them retaliate against the civilians" he growled finally, "It'll be a massacre."

"What do you suggest we do?" queried Barker sarcastically, "Hand ourselves over at the nearest Covie checkpoint?"

"Not us, just you!"

Barker whipped out a knife from his boot and grasped it before him, "Just try it you piece of Earther Scum!"

Connor's marines drew their pistols. Behind Barker Connor could see the other Constabulary officer's nervously reaching towards their own

sidearm's.

"There's nothing we can do" Chaucer said, "Except wait."

## 5. Chapter 4 " Reprisal

**\*\*Chapter 4 " Reprisal\*\***

**\*\*Location: Covenant Occupied Human Colony World New Carthage\*\***

**\*\*Date: 13 / 02 / 2545 (Human Military Calendar)\*\***

**\*\*1 Day after the events of Chapter 3\*\***

**\*\*48 Days prior to events of Prologue\*\***

Juha' Relusee could not tell if he was alive or dead.

The engagement with the humans in the plaza ricocheted throughout the warrior's throbbing skull like a superheated plaza spark in a reactor chamber. With stark lucidity he remembered descending down the Phantom's gravity chute, human gunfire bursting all around him as he had sprinted towards the convoy, Kilshree hard on his heels.

The humans had planted shaped explosives beneath the armoured Shadows. He'd caught them in the act but was too late to stop them triggering the charges.

The transport had exploded right in front of him. The scorching heat of fifty units of raw technetium being incinerated had stripped his energy shielding, melted his armour's receptors and singed his skin beneath. A searing pain had ripped through his chest at that moment, smothering Relusee in the cold embrace of darkness.

Clever vermin, these humans were.

Most resourceful when they were at their most desperate, most dangerous when faced with certain annihilation.

Did all this mean he was dead?

Relusee tried to wake. Tried and failed.

His eyes were closed and refused to open, his mandibles slack when he tried to move them. His limbs were unresponsive, his chest still. He couldn't even feel his arms and legs, nor his tongue, eye lids or breath.

Did that mean they were no longer his to command?

Perhaps he was dead, and he was among the God's.

The thought kindled a long forgotten dread in the back of Relusee's mind. This darkness, the all consuming shadow of the night was not the paradise he had expected. In fact it was anything but!

Were the Forerunner's punishing him?

Had he done something wrong, something to incur their wrath?

Now he came to think of it, he could not imagine any worse torment than what he felt now. To be denied sight, smell, sound and touch. To be left with only his thoughts until, forever...

How long had he been here for already?

The terror that was quickly overcoming Relusee's subconscious just as abruptly faded as a new sensation took hold of him, a comforting warmth which spread throughout him, tingling the distant nerves throughout his body.

He was alive, he was sure of it now!

"\_I need help\_"

A female's voice!

Relusee stirred, and in the waking world the warrior's mandibles twitched.

"\_Hold him down" \_the female ordered. Relusee could feel something now, on his chest. His breastplate had been removed, and someone was probing at the soft flesh beneath. He could hear the rhythmic hum of a miniature anti-gravity generator, and the smell of singed flesh reeked above him.

A gravity-prong and laser-scalpel. The instrument's of a surgeon.

That couldn't be good!

What were they doing to him?

The warmth in his chest was a blister now, not quite painful but not entirely pleasant either.

Truth be told he could have been in either agony or ecstasy and likely wouldn't have been able to tell the difference. In all honesty Relusee imagined the only way he could tell if he was in the thrall of pleasure or pain was whether he knew if he was screaming or laughing.

At his sides his hands moved slightly, the sharp tips of his claws scraping at the soft lining of the gel-bed. There was blood there, his blood slowly being absorbed by the gel layer.

"\_Forerunners Oath!" \_his guardian seraph hissed above, "\_Keep him still Commander." \_

A heavy pressure settled on his shoulders, powerful hands were holding him down.

"\_Why isn't he sedated?" \_another voice asked, firm and seasoned. A male.

\_Korequee?\_

"\_I've already induced sedatives into his blood stream" \_the female

replied angrily, \_"Any more and we risk organ failure. Just keep him still."\_

Relusee tried to talk, to tell them he was awake and ask what was going on, but his tongue remained stubbornly dry and limp in his mouth. Above him his apparent benefactors worked on oblivious to his semi-conscious state.

"\_Their terrible things" \_the female remarked above him.

"\_What are?" \_the male replied. It was Commander Korequee, he was certain of it now.

Something shifted inside him jolting Relusee with a sharp stab of pain. It was nothing he had not felt before, yet the ability not to react was unpleasant in the extreme.

"\_Human projectiles"\_ she finally replied.

Korequee snorted above him, \_"A primitive design Healer."\_

"\_Primitive?"\_ the evident healer retorted, \_"Until they shatter into a dozen pieces and imbed themselves in every corner of your body. After that Commander I assure you, they become the most sophisticated of little killers. Internal bleeding, blood poisoning, septic shock, there is no end to the complications."\_

The healer continued her work, and inside his chest Relusee felt something move again. Evidently whatever it was that he had lodged inside him was playing a most painful game of hide and seek with her instruments.

"\_These projectiles are worse than usual." \_she commented after a moment's pause.

"\_How so?"\_

"\_The humans have expended most of their standard issue ammunition" \_the healer replied, \_"My guess is that they have secured an alternative supply, from locally produced materials. Standard human slugs are designed to penetrate with maxim force and punch straight through their target creating a clear entry and exit wound. These rounds on the other hand shatter on impact and tear themselves into the internal organs."\_

Above him Korequee was silent, his hands still tightly clasped over Relusee's shoulders as he considered her words, \_"You believe they planned this?"\_

"\_Unlikely" \_the healer mused, \_"As I said, their producing it locally, inferior materials. The ammunition is poor quality as a result, less likely to penetrate standard infantry shielding and armour. I've found the last piece, it's loose. Got you."\_

Relusee felt her tear the last piece of human bullet fragment from his chest, and as the pain shot through his body his eyes opened as he let loose an agonized hiss.

"Relusee!"

Two figures materialized above him, a towering male and a slightly shorter female. Their outlines were a blur to his eyes, their features hazy. He made out Korequee first.

The Commander was in full armour. Whatever he'd been doing he come straight here to...

Where was he?

The female materialized over him a moment later. She was clad in an environmental body smock, her face hidden behind a chem-mask and her white gloves stained with blood. His blood.

"You're fine warrior" the female said. By her voice she was of mid age, significantly older then Relusee but likely a fare few cycles younger then Korequee.

"What happened..." Relusee coughed, "Where's my squ..."

"There fine Relusee" Korequee said, "Tasolmee, Texlusee and Kilshree are all unharmed."

The female leaned over him, discarding the human bullet fragment into a bedpan beside his stretcher, "My name is Sequesha. Mobile Field's Op's, I'm the ranking therapeutic officer in Central Command. You're in my field hospital."

Relusee tried to reply, but his mouth was utterly dry and his throat raw.

"No don't talk" Sequesha said as she reached down towards him, "I'm going to give you something for the pain."

Her claw like hand descended towards his eyes, the world above him disappearing beneath her palm.

"\_Sleep" \_she told him.

Relusee did as he was told. When the darkness came this time it was not entirely unpleasant.

He could still hear them talking above him. Their conversation had shifted, he could not recollect when.

"\_How many Sequesha?" \_Korequee was asking.

Sequesha's voice was sombre now, \_"Three of your Special Operation warriors were killed Commander. Nine terrestrial legionnaires, fourteen Kig-yar auxiliaries, twenty seven Unggoy and eleven \_\_Jiralhanae contractors. We're treating the wounded now."\_

"\_And the human insurgents?"\_

"\_So far we've uncovered over thirty bodies, their awaiting autopsy."\_

Korequee was silent, evidently brooding over the numbers. Relusee knew the Commander would have known each of the three Special Operation's commandos by name. He'd be writing to their families

tonight.

"\_There will be retaliations, won't there?"\_ Sequesha asked. Relusee noted a distinct sadness in her voice.

"\_Most certainly."\_

\* \* \*

><p>It was six hours later that the Covenant troops came to the makeshift human hospital.<p>

Doctor Alam was between shifts, snatching a few precious minutes of sleep in his chair when the sound of splintered wood, panicked screams and course alien voices awoke him from his slumber.

Fumbling across his cramped office Alam threw on his dingy white lab coat as he made his way out the door, running straight into a young nurse in the outside corridor.

"Doctor, Doctor" the young woman stammered, "There here, there taking..."

"It's alright Mira" Alam said stroking her shoulder, "Listen to me. I need you to get Sarah Morgan, put her on a gurney and take her to the south side of the building. Get her into one of the elevators and tell the technicians to jam the cables between the fourth and fifth floors. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Doctor" Mira hiccupped, dabbing at her tear stained cheeks.

"Good girl" Alam smiled, "Go, Now."

The fresh faced nurse disappeared down the corridor, her hurried footsteps echoing down the hallway.

Taking a deep breath Alam made his way towards the ground floor. Whatever the commotion was, it seemed to be spreading from the reception area. At the staircase Alam quickened his pace. He could hear the alien's high pitched bellows now and recognized the thick rasping voices as those which belonged to the Covenant's irregular troops.

Brutes.

He was lucky that they hadn't started shooting people yet.

It was as he emerged from the lower stairway that Alam caught his first glimpse of the Covenant brutes. Three of the hulking alien warriors were poised in the central corridor to the wards, their dark matted fur overlaid with heavy combat harnesses and webbing. Sleek energy weapons were gripped in their powerful hands.

Facing the Covenant soldiers were a line of kneeling humans. Each had their hands tightly tethered behind their backs whilst a black hood covered their heads. As Alam watched another of the brutes emerged from the ward, dragging a screaming woman still clad in her medical gown towards the waiting prisoners.



Hostages!

Something snapped inside Alam. He could not simply stand by and do nothing.

"Stop!" he shouted.

The brute paused, twisting on its paw like heels towards him.

"Let her go" Alam said, his cheeks flushed with rage.

The brute turned towards his companions who were only now taking notice of the outspoken little human before them. Fang filled maws opened in jeers of laughter.

"I said let her go you fools" Alam raged, "She won't even survive the trip. She'll die before you can shoot her."

Apparently oblivious to his words the lead brute turned his back on Alam, cuffing the poor woman's hands behind her back.

"I said stop!" Alam shouted as he reached forward and grasped a tuft of fur on the brute's thick forearm.

A meaty fist backhanded him straight across the face, catapulting the Doctor backwards. Alam felt his cheek bones shatter as he hit the floor, his vision blackening suddenly behind a blinding white pain which spread from his crushed cheek and across his jaw until his entire face was immersed in agony.

Thick powerful fingers secured his hands behind his back whilst his wrists were binded by heavy shackles. He was aware of screams around him, and dully Alam felt a black hood being forced over his head before he was pulled to his feet.

Suddenly he was be shuffled forwards.

The freezing chill of the Carthaginian winter bit deep into his exposed skin as the shackled and blinded humans were herded outside.

His senses dulled and vision restricted, Alam stumbled down the hospital steps, cursing as he almost fell over another prisoner in the process. The tight press of humans caught him, leading him forwards towards the complete unknown.

Alam couldn't say how the first prisoners found their way into the Covenant transport vehicles, but where those prisoners went the others followed. Soon Alam was being forced to shamle over his fellow humans as more and more pressed against his back, the Covenant guards herding the humans at gunpoint until each of their waiting hovercraft's was packed full in turn. Once fully loaded the smooth \_swoosh\_ of Covenant mechanics hummed around their enclosure. Alam clenched his teeth against the twisting pain in his stomach.

The journey was perhaps the worst of it.

The Covenant convoy glided away from the human hospital with faultless grace, banking their way through the streets of Novago with growing speed. Inside their sealed enclosure the humans sobbed,

coughed and puked. Alam counted himself lucky to be confined to a corner; his head away from the floor.

The smell inside the vehicle was something else entirely.

He couldn't say with any certainty how long the hellish trip lasted.

When the convoy slewed to a halt, the doors opened on their compartment. As quickly as the humans were herded into the waiting transport, they were unloaded by powerful claw like hands and thick guttural hisses. The tether binding his hands was cut and the hood was yanked from his head before a gloved hand shoved him forwards.

Alam rallied against the bright sun, lifting his hands to cover his eyes as his pupils dilated painfully. Licking his dry lips Alam tried to gain a bearing on his surroundings, his vision a blotchy haze.

Complex Covenant energy's spire's rose up ensnaring the humans behind a shimmering translucent barrier six metres high. Alam stepped backwards as more human prisoners were herded into the enclosure, dozens of men, women and small children stumbling blindly into the sealed holding pen.

"What's going on!" someone shouted.

"What are they going to do to us?" a woman screamed.

Alam navigated his way through the crowd, pushing towards the edge of the enclosure. His vision was returning now and as he came to the energy barrier the world outside suddenly solidified into focus.

"The plaza" he realized.

The Covenant had clearly been busy.

The far corner of the plaza had been completely exhumed, the crushed paving and spoil piled at the edge of a trench which ran almost from one end of the plaza to the other. In the centre of the former market square the Covenant had erected some kind of raised platform which was occupied by a handful of elites clad in gleaming armour of silver and gold. More standardized Covenant infantry lined the streets that linked the plaza's four corners. Alam glimpsed barricades with mounted plasma cannons, parked troops transports and patrol vehicles while elite and jackal snipers patrolled the surrounding rooftops.

There had to be an entire Covenant battalion if not a full regiment gathered into that square, and there was something else behind the ranks of massed troops.

Humans!

Alam blinked, rubbing at his eyes to make sure it was not a trick of the light. Behind the Covenant checkpoint's and barrier's humans in the hundreds were filling into the side streets, their sheer volume quickly filling all available space. There would soon be

thousands.

Alam clenched his hands behind his back, biting his lower lip. This was clearly not going to be a quick a clear affair as he'd expected, out of immediate sight and mind.

The Covenant wanted a public execution.

"What happening?"

The words were innocent enough, the voice softly spoken yet they still caught Alam by surprise as he twisted around.

A young boy no older than twelve was standing beside him, his pale face looking up at the Doctor. He was dreadfully thin, his skin was pallid while his body showed signs of emancipation. He was perhaps a year older than Alex.

\_Please let him be spared this horror\_ Alam prayed.

Around them other humans had begun to gather as the prisoners began to flock towards the enclosure's edge. The child's question was repeated by a hundred others. Some people sobbed, some screamed vile obscenities at the alien troops. Others broke down and cried while a handful remained deathly silent.

Alam thought of his wife back on Earth, tracing her lavender smooth hair with his fingers.

It had been so many months since he had last seen her. God how he yearned for her touch now.

Alam knew he was going to die here.

He had known it for so long now, but only now did he realize with true finality that he would never love anyone as he loved her.

Almost subconsciously his hand moved to the boy's shoulder.

"It'll be ok" he said, "This will all be over very soon."

Outside a detachment of Covenant soldiers were moving towards the enclosure. The unit's leader swept a claw like hand before one of the spires, a hidden signal in the alien's armour deactivating a portion of the barrier.

Without a word the elites stormed into the pen, pulling out humans seemingly at random.

Alam countered thirty humans leaving the enclosure, the Covenant officer reactivating the energy barrier before turning back towards the square. The remaining human prisoners looked on sullenly as their compatriots were marched towards the exhumed trench in a shambling single line flanked on either side by Covenant troops.

Across the plaza Alam caught a flash of sunlight on armour. From behind the raised platform emerged a single line of elites, thirty in total, each carrying a sleek alien energy rifle.

A firing squad.

\* \* \*

><p>"A fitting punishment" Penance mused, grooming the fine stands of his chin hair between the two manicured nails of his knobbly misshapen fingers, "Would you not agree Commander?"<p>

Commander Korequee glanced out from atop the raised platform overlooking the square, erected so the upper echelons of the Covenant occupation force could watch the coming punishment at their own leisure. First blood had not yet been spilled and the platform was already teaming with dozens of Sangheili military officers in burnished ceremonial armour, expensively robed San 'Shyuum officials and burly Jiralhanae mercenaries.

Down below a detachment of terrestrial legionnaire's had opened the holding pen and were escorting a selected group of at least two dozen humans towards the freshly dug trench at the edge of the square.

The moment stretched out around them as idle chatter filled the platform, a deathly silence descending on the plaza beneath.

"Am I talking to myself Commander?" Penance persisted, his voice marked by a stab of irritation.

"Apologies Excellency" Korequee replied curtly, "My mind had strayed to other matters."

Penance stared up at him, his thin lips curling downwards, "I hope it does not stray during battle Commander. I here an abundance of human projectiles at the wrong moment can be most unhealthy."

Korequee chuckled under his breath, thumping his chest with his clenched fist as he nosily cleared his throat. Penance may have been slimier then a Doisacan water snake, but his sense of humour could be invasively infectious at times.

Before he could respond Penance turned in his bobbling gravity throne, his gaze twisting over the Commander's shoulder.

"Our honoured guests have arrived" Penance declared as he raised his arms in ritual greeting.

Turning on his heel Korequee caught sight of a Sangheili in golden armour. It was the same zealot who had chaired their last council session, Field Master Ortz' Satoroquee.

The cantankerous old warrior was looking insufferably pleased with himself this day.

Fleet Master Talsharnee and High Priestess Ikarshree emerged from behind the Field Master, each attired in their ceremonial armour and robes. Ikarshree in particular looked stunningly beautiful to Korequee as she strode across the platform, the sunlight reflecting off her resplendent helm and breastplate.

Talsharnee paused by an attendant Kig-yar, pinning the harried waitress where she stood as he cleared the servant's tray of its two remaining wine glasses. As Korequee had come to expect Ikarshree

refused the glass the Fleet Master offered her. Undeterred Talsharnee drained the wine he had offered to the High Priestess in one mouthful before returning the empty glass to the plate. The towering Sangheili let the Kig-yar waitress pass without further action or comment, his own wine glass still clutched in the his claw like hand.

"Finally" boomed Talsharnee as the three Sangheili reached the edge of the platform where Penance and Korequee stood, "We will teach these humans the price of their cowardly resistance."

"My sentiments exactly Fleet Master" Penance replied, his fingers returning to the drooping stubble beneath his chin, "Why the Commander and I were just discussing this very matter."

Talsharnee lent over the platform's protective rail, sipping his wine as he inspected the square.

"How many hostages have we taken?" he asked.

"Fifteen hundred" Satoroquee answered, "Scooped up from every corner of the city."

Talsharnee mulled over the figure, the wine swashing in his glass, "We should have taken more."

"I disagree" Ikarshree said.

Talsharnee turned towards the High Priestess, "You feel we are being too harsh on the humans?" he sneered sarcastically.

Ikarshree tilted her helm, her gauntleted claw like hands falling to her hips as she regarded the Fleet Master with a cold glare, "Any collective punishment we administer to the humans of this world will need to be matched or exceeded with every subsequent display of force. If we butcher one in every ten Fleet Master, our production will fall by that tenth. Do we then begin executing them because they cannot meet the work quotas on account of those we have already executed? Such a strategy I fear would prove counterproductive."

Talsharnee snorted dismissively but did not take the argument any further. Ikarshree looked down into the square, her eyes falling on the humans being led out to the execution point.

"I see we are butchering the healthiest of our slave labour force, again" she sighed.

"Is that a hint of disapproval I hear in your voice Seja?" Penance pried.

Ikarshree turned towards the prophet, sweeping the teeming human crowd around the plaza's edge with her claws, "A full quarter of this city's remaining population will be gathered into this square by the time these executions are done. What they learn here today is all we need concern ourselves with. We cannot predict how the human resistance will respond to our actions, I'll reserve my judgement until the consequences of this demonstration can be fully analyzed and appreciated."

"Spoken like a true scholar" Penance laughed.

In the plaza the first group of human hostages were almost at the edge of the trench. A few yards away the Sangheili designated to the initial firing squad were already preparing their weapons. Talsharnee ordered another drink from a passing waiter. Ikarshree looked on in stoic silence.

Korequee felt someone bump into him from behind. He turned to find a Sangheili female in his shadow. He knew her face.

"Commander" she said, her mandibles parting in surprise, "I'm sorry."

"Sequesha."

Korequee curled his arm around the Healer before she could protest, pulling her into the small circle which had developed at the edge of the platform. Talsharnee and Ikarshree were in the process of turning to see what the commotion was while Penance and Satoroquee had already fixed eyes on the medical officer.

"May I take it that this is the chief therapeutic officer charged with the survivors of the human's spineless attack here?" Penance asked softly.

"You are correct Excellency" Sequesha replied, "All of the wounded are now in a stable condition. I do not see any further complications developing, some have already returned to active duty."

Penance smiled, the wizened San' Shyuum adopting his favoured voice and posture of that of the paternal old grandfather, "Our warriors could not be any better care, I am sure. The entire Covenant owes your profession a great debt healer."

He paused, gesturing towards the open plaza below. The humans were at the trench now. The terrestrials were lining them up next to each other, securing each human against a vertical pike at the trench's lip.

"A fitting punishment" Penance repeated, "They watered this very ground with the blood of our warriors, now we shall drench it with theirs."

Sequesha paused at the edge of the platform, her hands resting on the protective rail. The humans were screaming, thrashing against their restraints.

"Is it really necessary for their children to be among them?" Sequesha asked.

Satoroquee inhaled sharply.

Korequee glanced at Penance. For just a moment the Prophet's carefully crafted facade slipped and he saw a flash of pure anger. Talsharnee seemed amused by the remark while Ikarshree remained silent.

"The humans must know the full repercussions of their actions" Penance continued, "They must know that we will retaliate without prejudice or mercy. They must know that they are helpless against us."

Do you not agree with our methods healer?"

Sequesha turned back towards the Prophet. Korequee saw the same pity in her eyes that he had seen in the Field Hospital, "Brutality breeds brutality Excellency, in its rawest most savage form. You hope splashing the blood of fifteen hundred humans today will cull their will to resist? I fear it will only entice them to greater violence."

"You feel we should spare their children?" Talsharnee remarked, his words laced with disgust.

Sequesha turned towards him, "I have my own child Fleet Master, five cycles of age. There will be humans down there of the same age, if not younger awaiting execution."

"You compare our young to these, verminous abominations" Talsharnee seethed. Korequee reached for the energy sword at his hip, ready to protect the healer if necessary.

Sequesha met the Fleet Master's furious gaze, her composure unchanged, "No, but it doesn't stop me seeing him among them every time I lay eyes on that enclosure, and I will be far from the only one Fleet Master."

"Speak sense healer" Talsharnee growled.

Sequesha folded her arms, "I understand the execution squads are picked at random, each warrior partaking in one single execution per firing squad."

"Our warriors must be given the chance to avenge their kin" Talsharnee replied, "They must see as well as the humans our power over this world."

"Fifteen hundred warriors will partake in these executions" Sequesha remarked, "How many of them have family's Fleet Master? How many of them have children?"

"What concern is their family affairs healer?" Talsharnee growled, "Every warrior here knows the aim of our crusade, the complete eradication of humanity. They hate the humans with every fibre of their beings."

"Their hatred will make no difference Fleet Master" Sequesha replied calmly, "They will partake in this slaughter today, and every time they close their eyes they will see the faces of their children in those they have killed. The blood will stain their hands long after they have bathed and washed, until they claw the skin from their bones. I've seen it before."

"Enough of this preposterous nonsense" Talsharnee hissed as he turned back towards the square, "Satoroquee, begin the executions!"

Sequesha turned on her heel and made her way back from the edge of the platform, brushing past Korequee as she did so.

"Where are you going?" Penance called.

"I've already seen the results of one massacre this day" Sequesha replied over her shoulder, "I will not watch another."

The Honour Guard's on the platform moved to intercept her, but Penance waived them down with a dismissive swish of his fingers, "Let her go if she wishes."

Sequesha departed the raised platform without further comment, ceremony or commotion. Penance shook his head, muttering something under his breath as he turned towards the golden armoured Field Master, "Satoroquee, if you would be so kind?"

With a wave of his arm the zealot gave the signal. Down below the terrestrial officer shouted out an order. Thirty Sangheili warriors snapped up their storm rifles, took aim and fired.

Thirty humans were lacerated with lancing plasma bolts, their bodies lurching drunkenly backwards as the poles they were tethered too retracted back into the ground, their bindings coming undone as their corpses tumbled into the trench.

\* \* \*

><p>Halfway across the frozen city a small boy was sprinting through the deserted streets, not away from the central plaza in the direction that so many of his fellow humans were fleeing, but straight towards it.<p>

Alex paused at a vacant intersection, leaning against an abandoned automobile as he struggled to regain his breath and find his bearings.

Sarah was safe, but they'd taken Alam!

Why had they taken Alam?

The hospital had been on the verge of chaos when Alex had arrived, his smuggled medical supplies a pathetic gesture against what the Covenant soldiers had taken from the humans. The panicked nurses and orderlies had been repeating one thing over and over.

The plaza, they had been taken to the plaza.

A sharp crack, like a bolt of thunder in the dead of night suddenly echoed across the city.

Alex flinched at the sound then stumbled, almost losing his footing in the snow. He recognized the sound of Covenant plasma rifles, the sound of many plasma rifles fired in mass.

The executions had begun.

"Alam" he gasped, taking off across the intersection.

It was ten, perhaps fifteen minutes later that the Covenant let loose their second volley of plasma rounds. A third round of directed plasma fire followed after another fifteen minutes, then a forth, then a fifth, and then a sixth and seventh.

Alex quickly lost count of the number of times the Covenant soldiers



had fired their weapons. It had been over two hours since he had left the hospital. He was exhausted, sweat dripping from his temples and nose despite the snow that fell from the sky.

Was Alam even still alive?

It was just he passed beneath the Maxton overpass on Novago's west end that Alex saw movement. Hundreds of humans were being shepherded down the main thoroughfare. Dozens of heavily armed Covenant soldiers were lining the street, dogging the dishevelled and malnourished Carthaginians every step of the way.

Alex ducked into one of the side streets, forgoing any caution in favour of speed.

Luck was with him.

The alleyway was deserted. Alex rounded the street corner and emerged onto the edge of the Carthaginian central plaza. The square was thronged with humans. Hundreds if not thousands of them packed the plaza's adjacent streets. Bulbous Covenant checkpoints were posted at every entrance to the main square from which even more humans were being herded in and forced to watch the bloody executions.

Alex scrambled down the road, fighting and jostling against the crowd to get a clear view of the square. Clambering atop the metal frame of a burnt out warthog Alex caught his first clear glimpse of the central plaza.

He saw the Covenant observation platform, its armoured peek capped with small crowd of richly armoured elites. He saw the narrow slit trench at the edge of the square where a large group of elites in blue combat armour were dispersing, and finally Alex saw the fenced enclosure at the other side of the plaza where an equal number of humans were being dragged from by the Covenant guards.

"Alam!" Alex shouted, catching site of the Asian doctor among the small group.

Alam, still in his white lab coat turned to look at Alex. It was a brief fleeting glimpse of recognition before a swarthy ape like brute rounded on the Doctor and shoved him forward.

"Alam" Alex shouted again, cupping his hands either side of his mouth.

It was no use. The human prisoners were herded forwards towards the slit trench.

They were going to be executed.

Alex desperately scrambled down from the Warthog and sprinted down the road. He had to find a way into the square, he had to save Alam.

Reaching the junction on the plaza's corner Alex ducked beneath a parked Covenant troop transport, painfully grazing his shoulder on the hovercraft's slanted chassis. Emerging from the Shadow's other side Alex found himself in a small empty side street. At the alley's far end a Covenant checkpoint blocked the entrance to the

plaza.

There were elites guarding the checkpoint, about half a dozen of the towering saurian like aliens and at least twice the number of the smaller grunts and jackals. They'd kill him if they saw him, but Alex didn't care.

Alam was the one constant in both his and his sister's lives. He'd protected Sarah since this hell had first begun.

The Covenant soldiers were distracted. All of them were looking towards the central plaza. Alam took off at a sprint, dashing straight towards the barricade. The Covenant soldier's attention remained fixated on the plaza, completely oblivious to the small boy's approach as the noise of thousands of humans crammed into the square drowned out the sound of his approaching footfalls.

Alex reached the barricade, using one of the strange alien storage crates as a foothold. The closest elite chose that moment to turn towards him, its lower mandibles parting in surprise as Alex gripped the protective barrier's edge and vaulted the barricade.

The alien reacted with terrifying speed, storming forwards and seizing Alex around the waist with a powerful arm.

"Alam!" he cried, catching sight of his informal guardian.

Alam was at the edge of the slit trench now, his arms bound behind his back and his head blindfolded. A line of elites had taken up position in front of the prisoners, a row of sleek plasma rifles gripped in their gloved claws.

Alex thrashed and kicked against his captor as the alien soldier forced him to the ground. Across the square an elite in red crimson armour shouted an order to the assembled warriors. The elite's raised their plasma rifles, taking aim.

"Nooooo!" Alex screamed.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Fifteen Minutes Before<strong>

Nakitee's assigned prisoner was a squat human female of middle aged, pink skinned with a pale complexion.

The terrestrial officer who was in command of the execution detail gave the order to take aim. Nakitee along with the twenty nine other Sangheili warriors raised their weapons, the stock of her storm rifle sliding up neatly against her shoulder as she sighted the prisoner in her holo-scope.

The humans were screaming now, writhing against their bindings which shackled them to the stakes at the edge of the trench. Her own hostage was shrieking under her hood, tearing the skin of her wrists as she tried to break loose her manacles.

The Sangheili officer gave the order to fire.

Nakitee shot her prisoner straight through the heart, praying the

poor creature would die instantly. Down the line thirty human hostages lurched drunkenly against their restraints, and as the pike's retracted back into the ground their bindings were shed. The corpses tumbled backwards into the trench, some relatively cleanly, others less so.

Nakitee had killed before, but the sight of her prisoner's body somersaulting head over heels into the trench turned her stomach.

"Safe" the terrestrial officer yelled.

In perfect unison the Sangheili stood to ease, their rifles at their sides. The warrior beside her, a young male snickered under his breath. The square was deathly silent.

Finally the officer gave the order for the execution detail to disperse. Snapping up her rifle Nakitee turned and made her way back towards her unit's assigned checkpoint, the other Sangheili scattering back to their various sections and cohorts.

The next group of human prisoners were already being marshalled from the enclosure at the edge of the plaza, the Jiralhanae mercenaries herding them forwards at gunpoint.

Nakitee surveyed them as they past. There were males among them, females too. Humans of light skin complexion and humans of darker skin complexion. A small number of human children scampered along behind their elders, some smaller and no doubt younger than her brothers.

When she thought about that, Nakitee feared that she would throw up and thanked the Forerunners that her prisoner had been an adult.

But why did such a thought unsettle her?

By the God's they were just humans, barbarian vermin from the outer rim.

Her father had killed millions of them from the bridge of his cruiser, humans of all ages. Why was she so unsettled at the prospect of killing just one?

The humans passed her by without incident. The last human she set eyes on was a dark skinned male of middle age clad in what appeared to be an overly long white tunic.

Very strange, these humans she reflected.

Falshree greeted her back at their checkpoint with a mischievous grin.

"What was it like?" the backwater Sangheili asked.

Nakitee paused, unsure how to respond.

"Prolonged" she replied after an overly long delay.

Their Cohort's section had been assigned to watch over three side streets that led into the square. Nakitee immediate unit consisted of

Falshree, Tasmansee, Ahrmonree, Zakamee and three other terrestrial Sangheili along with a support team of twelve Unggoy and six Kig-yar. Their checkpoint watched over a narrow human side street which had been closed to all foot and vehicle traffic.

"We should be flaying them" Tasmansee commented from the barricade, "Slowly, just as we did with those Pfhor raiders at Newfound."

Some of the terrestrial's murmured in agreement.

Some didn't.

From the corner of her eye Nakitee could see Zakamee had suddenly found something of interest in one of the storage crates. The female's mandibles were drawn tightly inwards, as if she was trying to bite back a retort.

"At least you got your turn" Falshree said folding her arms, "At this rate my number will never come up."

As if in immediate reply Major Domino Veskeriee appeared, seemingly and unnervingly from nowhere. The terrestrial's snapped to attention.

"Legionnaire Zera' Falshree" Veskeriee called.

"Yes Excellency" Falshree replied.

"You've been selected for the next firing detail, assume your position and await orders."

Falshree saluted. With the same mischievous grin she snapped up her storm rifle and sprinted towards the trench where the humans were already being lined up.

"Don't miss!" Ahrmonree called after her.

Nakitee settled back against the barricade to where Zakamee was still sorting through the storage crate. The other Sangheili along with the attending Unggoy and Kig-yar auxiliaries were watching as the humans were tethered to the raised stakes. The human crowd gathered around the plaza's edge had reached an most clamorous volume of noise now. Clearly they didn't want to be here.

\_Let them watch\_ Nakitee thought savagely, \_As I watched my friends bleed and die here.\_

Falshree had gleefully taken her position among her fellow Sangheili. The warriors were in position now, the terrestrial officer at the end of the line giving the order to take aim. Something in that moment made Nakitee turn to what she suddenly realized was the sound of approaching footfalls masked by the rasping clamour of voices coming from the plaza.

A human youngling was at the checkpoint, clambering over the barrier. Pure instinct took over Nakitee actions. Her storm rifle was by her side, her plasma pistol still holstered at her hip and the child was already vaunting over the barricade. Nakitee twisted towards him and grasped the human whelp around his waist with her free arm.

Zakamee was already moving to support her, clasping a fully stocked needler over her gauntlet as Nakitee pulled the human down. The youngling fought against her with an almost laughable ferocity, swinging against her thigh guards and lower abdomen with swollen pudgy fists.

Across the square Nakitee was intuitively aware of the officer giving the final order, and then the execution detail fired.

\* \* \*

><p>Alam had known up until that very second that he was about to die. Tethered to the stake and blinded to the outside world, Alam had wept beneath his hood. The tears had not been for himself, for he was strangely at peace with what was about to happen.<p>

He had wept for his patients that he'd been unable to save, for the patients that he still wouldn't be able to save. He'd wept for Alex Morgan and his sister, for all the humans that had died this far. Finally he had wept for his loved ones, those still alive on Earth, and those who had passed on.

"Saida" he'd whispered, "I'll always love you."

Alam was dully aware of the muffled sound of orders being given outside his hood. The sound of weapons being readied in unison, the sound of sobbing, screaming and all manner of curses and insult's being hurtled from desperate lips.

Alam arched his back and straightened his shoulders. If he was going to die he decided, he'd die standing tall.

"We'll meet again" he promised, "I love you!"

The Covenant execution squad fired.

Alam gasped, but there was nothing. No pain, no searing agony burning through his chest, nothing at all.

Was he dead or alive?

Was this death now?

He couldn't feel, or could he?

His shoulders tensed, and Alam was suddenly aware that falling snow was still tingling the hairs of his exposed skin.

\* \* \*

><p>"Why isn't that human dead?" Penance asked.<p>

The question was not directed to anyone on the raised platform in particular. War Chieftain Vorackus had appeared by the elderly Prophet's side, the swarthy Jiralhanae chuckling under his breath as Satoroquee angrily gestured for an aide to get him a comm.'s link to the officer in command of the execution detail.

Korequee did not respond, his eyes remaining fixed on the square's edge.

Down below the lone human their attention was gathered upon was still tethered to his stake at the edge of the trench, alive and unharmed for all in the plaza to see. The prisoner's executioner, a terrestrial legionnaire by her armour's configuration was checking over her storm rifle, furiously striping the components of the barrel.

"I'm waiting for an answer" Penance persisted, "And would appreciate one before sunset."

"I..." Satoroquee began.

"Her weapon jammed Excellency" Korequee responded.

Both the Sangheili and San' Shyuum turned to face him. Penance's expression of barely concealed anger turned to one of tepid curiosity, "A result or poor maintenance?"

"Most likely a malfunction Excellency. One beyond the control of the weapon's owner." Korequee replied.

"How can you be sure?" Talsharnee mused.

Korequee flexed his shoulders, "The terrestrial in question is known to me Excellency, by association of one of my best warriors. She is a mischievous young female, but meticulous in her maintenance of state weaponry and armour. If I am correct the plasma chamber has magnetized, it prevents the catalyst from focusing the raw plasma stored in the rifle's energy chamber. It's a recent problem, but we estimate it effects one in every thousand shots, out of every hundred Storm rifles produced."

He could see Zel' Tasolmee from the corner of his eye. The towering warrior was poised at the edge of the execution square flanked by Texlusee and Kilshree, and by all indications he was in the midst of a hysterical laughing fit.

Penance paused for a moment, twisting his head towards the sky as he mulled over Korequee's words, "And this problem is well known to Central Military Command I take it?"

"It is more than known" Vorackus rumbled from beside the prophet, "As I can personally attest too."

All eyes turned towards the Jiralhanae chieftain. Talsharnee pursed his mandibles in evident distaste. Korequee was silent. He had not expected an ally in Vorackus.

"I purchased a shipment of storm rifles last cycle from the Qikostan Merchant Guild, a number of which turned out to be defective, but the Guild wouldn't have any of it. After a little digging I discovered they recently executed a change in their minor supplier's at the behest of their newly appointed Guild Master. The move was a disastrous blunder, the supplier provided untested materials. Both the Guild Council and Master are now locked in a statemate. Naturally they are trying to keep the matter under wraps. I've heard they've already put a bounty on the Kig-yar who arranged the contract."

"And as a result our warrior's lives are put at risk as a result of

this, credit pinching foolishness" Penance mused, "A most unacceptable position."

The Prophet was silent as he deliberated. Almost as an afterthought he glanced back towards the square, "Ah yes. Commander, please deal with that."

Korequee signalled Tasolmee with a wave of his arm. The Special Operation's warrior gave acknowledgement, and with a savage downward stroke of his hand Korequee gave the order.

Tasolmee levelled his focus rifle at the human prisoner and fired. The charged particle beam struck the human with full force, rupturing his chest cavity and incinerating his upper torso with a calamity of flailing limbs and spurting partially boiled arterial blood. The hostage's corpse tumbled backwards in two parts, the spinal column snapping as it cartwheeled into the trench with its kin.

"Vorackus" Penance said softly.

"Yes Excellency"

"Circulate a rumour back to High Charity. The Qikostan Merchant Guild are partitioning the Ministry of War to service the Spinward Carrier fleet next cycle. Let them believe the Sepherian Star Combine has undercut their offer, significantly. I want to make them bleed a little."

"It will be done Excellency" Vorackus replied. Korequee noted a distinct edge of amusement in the Chieftain's tone.

"Then let us continue" Penance declared, clapping his hands together. Beneath them the execution squad dispersed back to their units.

It was to be a very long evening.

\* \* \*

><p>The human whelp screamed as the crack of Covenant storm rifles firing in mass ricocheted across the plaza, almost as if he himself had been on the receiving end of the execution detail's latest volley.<p>

"Silence him now!" Zakamee hissed, a touch of panic in her voice.

Nakitee clamped her gloved hand over the human youngling's mouth, her long claw like fingers encircling his lower jaw and neck as she pinned him to her chest.

\_Forerunners Grace\_ Nakitee thought, \_I barely laid a hand on him.\_

A quick glance over her shoulder told Nakitee that the little human's outburst had been confined to the three of them. The rest of her unit were preoccupied with some new drama unfolding in the plaza, whilst the incessant chatter of the human crowd was enough to drown out the child's feeble whimpers.

Nakitee knew their temporary safety would be a fleeting one.

Tasmansee and Ahrmonree would shoot the child without hesitation, and that would leave Zakamee and Nakitee with some very unpleasant questions to answer at best.

"What do we do with it?" Zakamee asked, an edge of true fear in her voice. She was no doubt thinking of her own child now, and the ramifications of their actions here today.

Nakitee glanced over the barricade, spying a small alleyway a few paces from their checkpoint.

\_Why am I doing this\_ she thought, \_Why do I even care?\_

"Follow me" she hissed.

Nakitee led them around the barricade and into the side street, her curled arm locking the human child to her breastplate. As soon as they reached the alleyway Nakitee deposited the alien youngling to the ground with a less than gentle hoist. Zakamee took position behind her facing out into the side street, her weapon drawn.

"\_Go!" \_ Nakitee ordered in her best approximation of the human's language.

The child stumbled to his feet and with an almost paradoxical pause attempted to make his way around the Sangheili and back into the side street. Nakitee blushed in anger. Reaching down she thrust her claw like hand to the human's chest. The push was a touch more forceful than she had intended and the child stumbled backwards before losing his footing, again.

"\_Go!" \_Nakitee all but screamed, her storm rifle at her side. Her patience was wearing thin with this idiotic human brat.

The child glanced up at her, his skin pallid and eyes hazy.

The boy was a ghost.

Nakitee raised her hand, about to deliver a savage backhanded swipe to the child, just as her own mother cycles ago had shown the Sangheili child the back of her hand when she had misbehaved or spoken heresy.

The child's expression stopped her.

He was crying.

Nakitee's infant brothers flashed before her eyes, and something else. Days past, not that long ago, a forgotten alley somewhere in the city, splashed crimson with human blood. A small child hugged to her chest, Nakitee trying to protect him from what she saw, what her sisters intended to do.

\_It couldn't be\_ she thought, lowering her hand.

The moment stretched past. A dozen beats of her hearts, two dozen.

She could hear voices outside the alley, Zakamee cursing under her breath.



Nakitee raised her storm rifle, the energy weapon's sleek barrel brushing against the child's scalp.

The physical contact was enough to thaw him from his stupor.

The human stumbled backwards, turned and scrambled away on his hands, feet and knees like some half wild animal. Nakitee tracked the youngling with her weapon until he rounded the alleyway's edge.

"We must go" Zakamee hissed.

Nakitee turned back towards the side street, her claw like forefinger releasing the rifle's trigger guard. Together the two terrestrial legionnaire's scarpered back towards the checkpoint.

Luck had been with them, they had not been missed.

## 6. Chapter 5 - (Part I)

**\*\*Chapter 5 â€" Shooting Star (Part I)\*\***

**\*\*Location: Covenant Occupied Human Colony World New Carthage\*\***

**\*\*Date: 28 / 02 / 2545 (Human Military Calendar)\*\***

**\*\*15 Days after the events of Chapter 4\*\***

**\*\*33 Days prior to events of Prologue\*\***

The Terrestrial Cohort surrounded the human tenement block in the early hours of the morning, each lance utilizing the last precious seconds of darkness to deploy their support units as the first rays of sunlight glanced over the distant mountains.

Suka' Nakitee's lance took the eastern most human habitation tower by storm, bursting through each of the three separate entry points simultaneously. Tasmansee was the first in, Ahrmonree was a single step behind her whilst Nakitee and Falshree took positions either side of the breeched doorway, their storm rifles raised.

"Clear" Tasmansee shouted, "Move up."

The rest of their section consisting of six Sangheili, twelve Kig-yar and twenty Unggoy filled into the human building in neatly practiced efficiency. Two terrestrials along with four Unggoy were left to guard the entrance. The remaining Covenant troops moved down the central corridor and began their search.

Signalling for two Kig-yar auxiliaries to join them Nakitee and Falshree took the first of the human apartments. Nakitee kicked down the primitive wooden door, sweeping her rifle across the open apartment.

The human dwelling was crude even by frontier standards, a drab common area filled with small uncomfortable looking furniture and appliances. Nakitee strode straight across the room and barged open a second door. Two humans, a male and a female reared up at her from

their bed, shrieking in terror.

"\_Out"\_ Nakitee shouted in the humans tongue, gesturing towards the doorway with a sharp sweep of her weapon, "\_Now!"\_

The humans scrambled from their bed half naked, Nakitee waving them towards the open doorway. Falshree herded the cowering squat little aliens towards the far edge of the apartment. The Kig-yar took up guard position as they had been trained, aiming their plasma pistols at the two sobbing humans as Nakitee and Falshree holstered their weapons and began their search.

The two Sangheili ransacked the apartment in short order. Nakitee started with the dresser at the far end, ripping out each of the draws in turn and emptying their contents onto the floor. As she trailed through the drab human clothing and fabric with her hooves Falshree went to work on the furniture, overturning the tables, smashing open the countertop's and breaking each of the wooden table legs in turn. Once both of the terrestrials were satisfied that the human occupants were not concealing any weapons, communication gear or medical supplies they called off the Kig-yar auxiliaries and moved back into the hallway. Had they been on a Jiralhanae colony or distant frontier world, regulation would have dictated that Nakitee and Falshree thank the residents for their patience during the raid. On their way out Nakitee slammed the broken door closed, the unspoken message to the humans was clear.

The next few apartments Nakitee and Falshree raided proved to be just as equally fruitless. Most of the humans were up and about now, cowering with their kin and offspring as they waited for their doors to be kicked down.

It was during their sixth search that the lance found their first hidden contraband.

The apartment Nakitee and Falshree were searching was occupied by a family, two humans adults and two children. Oddly enough Falshree had elected to stand guard, her weapon trained on the youngest child. The Kig-yar were rifling through the humans bedroom while Nakitee was searching through the kitchen, ripping open the cupboards and appliances when she heard Ahrmonree's voice.

"Weapon Found!"

Nakitee and Falshree entered the central corridor and saw Ahrmonree emerging from the opposite apartment dragging two human males in her wake. Tasmansee appeared behind her clutching a toy sized human submachine gun in her claw like hand.

"Found it secreted in a compartment cut into their wall" Tasmansee laughed victoriously "Four magazines of ammunition."

The Terrestrials and auxiliaries already in the hallway applauded. With the first find of the day theirs Tasmansee and Ahrmonree would now have privileged access to the restricted legionary drinking tab. Back in the barracks in the Central Spire they would be getting very drunk tonight.

The two humans were forced to kneel, hands behind their heads.

Tasmansee's claw like fingers curled around the submachine guns grip. Flicking off the safety she emptied a sustained burst point blank into the back of the first prisoner's head. The human's skull came apart like a shattered egg, thick alien blood splashed across the walls, ceiling and roof.

The second human screamed and twisted away from his fallen kin, trying to run. Ahrmonree pulled out her plasma pistol and cut him down with a shot to the head. The bodies were left where they fell, and like some well maintained chronometer the Covenant troops went back to work.

The human tenement block was large, and there were many rooms to search.

It was mid morning by the time they had swept half of the structure. Nakitee, Falshree, Tasmansee and Ahrmonree were taking a short break in one of the arterial stairways, passing a liquor enhanced canteen between themselves and two other terrestrials. All of the tenement block exits were secured and the Unggoy auxiliaries patrolled every level. They could afford to wait a short while.

"You want to be careful your rifle does not jam again sister" one of the terrestrial's said as she took a mouthful from the canteen, her friend chuckling under her breath.

Falshree's response with where the reservist could go with her opinion was both inventive and obscene, even by frontier standards.

"It could have happened to any of us Falshree" Ahrmonree said, "If you ask me you were lucky."

"Lucky" Falshree hissed sarcastically, "How exactly did you come to that conclusion?"

"Be thankful it happened when the humans were not armed" Ahrmonree replied, "and able to kill you because of it. I'd take minor embarrassment over internal bleeding any day."

Falshree grumbled under her breath, reluctantly conceding the point. Their conversation strayed to other matters.

"Something I've never been able to get my head around" one of the terrestrials said, "We're here to occupy this world, some say to prepare it for colonization. We're relocating the humans to these camps. How are we disposing of them?"

"Slow plasma burn" Tasmansee answered, "Vaporizes organic tissue on contact."

"That's what I heard as well" the terrestrial replied, "But that's what doesn't make sense. My mother's a technician back home with the Sepherian combine. Slow burn is hideously expensive. If we wanted to incinerate the humans we'd be better using fossil fuels."

"I heard we only partially burn the bodies" Ahrmonree commented, "Then dispose of the remains conventionally."

"So that would be thirty to forty million humans that we've worked our way through so far" the terrestrial replied, "Where are the bodies?"

Tasmansee suddenly reached towards her helm, "Yes Veskeriee. We've just cleared the 7th level now" she lied, "Affirmative; we'll rendezvous with you at the top."

"I see you're being less than economical with the truth again" Ahrmonree commented.

"Come on" Tasmansee said, "The Dragon is on us. Best move before she starts breathing fire."

The remaining half of the habitation block was almost entirely depopulated. The apartments were barren derelict shells, a handful showed signs of use, but their occupants had clearly fled days, perhaps even weeks ago.

Bar one.

They met Major Veskeriee on the highest floor, the two halves of their lance assembling from opposite ends of the corridor. In the centre of the long hallway they detected human life signatures inside the last remaining apartment block.

Veskeriee took one side of the door and Nakitee took the other side, the remaining terrestrials and Kig-yar auxiliaries lining up behind them, weapons drawn and ready. It was touch bit overkill, but there was little else for them to do.

"Two humans, main room" Veskeriee reported, her attention fixed on the handheld motion tracker in her claw like hand, "Scratch that, three humans. Two in the main room, one in a side room. Breach!"

Nakitee went straight for the lock, delivering a solid kick from her armoured hoof. The door smashed open and the Covenant soldiers stormed into the small apartment, weapons raised.

A human male and female were standing in the centre of the room, their hands already rising before the splintered wood had even touched the floor. They were babbling incoherently, their atrocious tongue so incoherent that even Nakitee, who had picked up a basic grasp of their language could not understand what they were saying. After a moment's pause Ahrmonree surged forward and smashed her rifle butt into the male's face.

The human tumbled backwards, his nose a bloodied ruin as the female screamed, clutching her partner as they both went down to their knees.

"Ahrmonree, watch them" Veskeriee hissed, "Nakitee, Falshree, check the human in the side room. The rest of us will search the main habitat."

The Sangheili and Kig-yar went to work with methodical precision, tearing the little apartment to pieces as Nakitee and Falshree made their way towards the side room. The door was not locked but the room was dark. Nakitee activated her night vision, and as her eyes

adjusted to the gloom she caught sight of the third human.

The child had woken up just as the two Sangheili females had entered the room. From behind the raised bars of a wooden cradle the human infant regarded the two terrestrials with wide inquisitive eyes.

It was female, fair skinned and slightly malnourished. If Nakitee had to guess she would have placed the child's age at below half a standard Sangheili cycle.

They paid the newborn little attention as they began their search of the nursery. Falshree started at one end of the room and Nakitee started at the other, the two females ripping open draws and upending their contents onto the floor, rifling through the human's meagre possessions with casual disdain.

For her own part the human child thought the intrusion was some sought of game and gleefully clapped her hands, turning over her own toys in an infantile mimicking of the Sangheili's own action.

Nakitee clenched her mandibles, keeping her back to the child. Falshree was deathly silent at the other end of the room.

Inevitably the two Sangheili ended up back where they had begun, standing over the cot in the centre of the room and looking down at the human baby.

"They wouldn't have" Falshree said, "Not even the humans could be that foolish."

"We have to look" Nakitee replied as she reached down, her long claw like fingers curling about the child's waist as she lifted the human from the cradle. Falshree accepted the infant gingerly, holding her at arm's length, her mandibles curled in disgust.

Nakitee reached beneath the cradle's mattress, not expecting to find anything. The tips of her claws brushed something cold and unmistakably metallic. Nakitee let loose a soft hiss as her gloved fingers curled around the object, her thumb brushing over the trigger guard.

Veskeriee appeared at the doorway just as Nakitee withdrew her gauntlet from beneath the cradle's mattress, the undersized human pistol grasped in her hand.

"Is it loaded?" Veskeriee asked sullenly.

Nakitee delicately turned the weapon over in her hand, "The magazine has been removed. There's a single round in the main chamber."

Veskeriee was silent for a moment, her eyes flickering between the pistol, the cradle and the now struggling infant in Falshree's claws. She turned back towards the main room, the two humans cowered in the centre. All the other Sangheili and Kig-yar were waiting around the apartment's edge, waiting.

The Sangheili Major Domino clicked her lower mandibles, "Kill them!"

Ahrmonree and Tasmansee came upon the kneeling prisoners from behind. The humans screamed as the two terrestrials grasped them by their necks and drew their plasma pistols. The female cried out, making a sudden dash for the nursery, Ahrmonree blew the back of her skull out point blank. Her partner joined her a moment later as Tasmansee put a plasma round straight through his neck.

The infant squealed in Falshree's arms, it's pinkish little face streaming with tears. Falshree not ungently returned the sobbing child to the empty cradle, dusting her hands off as if she had just been on sanitation duty.

"What do we do with the brat?" one of the terrestrial's asked.

Veskeriee regarded the infant with cold grey eyes, her hand straying down to the plasma sword at her hip.

"This level is abandoned" she remarked, "Let it starve."

\* \* \*

><p>"My Auspex!"<p>

Falshree hand dropped to her combat belt, her claws brushing the exact spot that her personnel scanner should have been fixed.

Nakitee turned towards her friend as the Terrestrial anxiously searched her combat harness, patting down all the dermal seals and shallow pockets her armour provided. They were on the habitation block's ground floor, shepherding the last of the Unggoy auxiliaries back towards their parked Shadow troop transports.

Falshree swore beneath her breath, her dark skin flushing blood purple, "Veskeriee's going to kill me."

Nakitee winced at the thought. Killing an underling was still a reprimandable offense even among the most traditionalist of Sangheili commanders. Then again, so was misplacing state issued equipment in an active pacification zone. It would all come down to whether Veskeriee really wanted to deal with the subsequent paper work.

"Where did you last have it?" Nakitee asked.

Falshree paused, her mandibles curling inwards, "The human's nursery. I was scanning the walls for explosive residue. It must still be there. Stall them!"

"How!" Nakitee exclaimed as her friend twisted on her heel and took off at a sprint back the way they had just come.

"Think of something" Falshree called from over her shoulder, scattering a squad of Unggoy as she pounded down the corridor. Nakitee shook her head as she watched her partner disappear around the corner at the hallway's far edge.

Falshree vaulted up the central stairway with a determination that

would put a professional athlete to shame, the Sangheili's long legs carry her up the human created steps three at a time. By the time she reached the top floor she was thoroughly exhausted and paused outside the shattered doorway to catch her breath. After a moments respite she entered the apartment, trekking around the corpses of the human hab dwellers her sisters had left.

Her auspex was exactly where she had left it, sitting on one of the wooden display cabinets in the nursery. Falshree ignored the device and went straight to the cradle.

The human newborn was still crying, its previous bawling reduced to a pathetic sob as it sat upright atop the ruffled mattress, its pudgy pink hands curled around the cradle's bars. Falshree reached down and swept the human infant up into her arms, cradling the child to her chest with no small amount of unease.

"It's alright" Falshree whispered in her own tongue, "I've got you."

\_God's Above\_ she thought \_Why am I doing this?\_

She scooped up her auspex as she left the nursery, reattaching the luminous little scanner to her combat belt. Falshree did her best to shield the child from the bodies of what were very likely its parents and checked that the corridor was clear, her arms curled protectively around the now slumbering infant.

She made straight for the human emergency fire staircase, preying it was not being guarded. A handful of terrestrials and auxiliaries were still sweeping the building, acting as a rearguard to the main patrol. Half way down the building Falshree almost walked straight into them.

Two Kig-yar emerged from a human apartment, squawking loudly in their almost inaudible language and completely oblivious to the world around them. Falshree backed herself against the wall, the infant suddenly stirring in her arms.

"Please" Falshree pleaded, "Go back to sleep."

Mercifully the child did as she asked, snuggling back into cooling embrace of Falshree's breastplate. The Kig-yar departed the corridor without incident, their screeching voices echoing throughout the building. They were having quite an argument.

Falshree found the apartment from memory. The search had been a standard one, two humans, male and female, nothing found. The door was closed, but her auspex told her that two heat signatures were sitting in the centre of the room. Falshree lowered the sleeping child to the ground, and once she had ensured it was safely swaddled pounded her fist against the door three times.

She did not wait for them to open the door. Rising back to her full height Falshree gingerly stepped over the still sleeping baby and made her way back towards the central staircase. She did not look back but as she rounded the hallways far corner she heard a door open, muted footsteps and whispers.

Falshree was the last to regroup with her section outside the

habitation block. Veskeriee chastised her thoroughly, much to the amusement of her sister legionnaires, and rounded off her rant with a personnel opinion that half of them should have been forcibly aborted at birth.

It was a fairly standard tirade as Veskeriee went, and nothing more would be said of it.

Consequently what Falshree had done was punishable by dishonourment, ritual excruciation and execution.

She would live to regret it!

\* \* \*

><p>The Covenant C&C was depressingly quite, even for the graveyard shift.<p>

Commander Taia' Korequee had elected to take command of the much reduced detail that evening, favouring the sombre quite of the long night to clear his mind and catch up on his own voluminous paperwork.

He was now pacing the lower strategium, in the midst of quite conversation with the C&C staff officers when the armoured doors to the Covenant Command & Control Centre gracefully slid open. Korequee glanced across the sealed chamber, surprised that anyone would be paying a visit at this late hour.

The Sangheili's warriors on guard duty that night stood to attention then knelt, in ritual greeting to the newcomers rank.

"High Priestess" Korequee called, gesturing to the largely empty chamber "We were not expecting guests this night."

Ikarshree ascended the steps to the raised platform that stood atop the central strategium, waving down the attendant guards with a polite smile and soft comforting words. The warrior's relaxed immediately, only a handful seeming to remain ill at ease at the female's presence.

"I found myself in possession of a large abundance of time" Ikarshree replied, "And wished to set eyes on the night sky from above the clouds."

The High Priestess circled the luxurious gravity throne at the centre of the platform, making her way towards the observation deck at the very edge of the chamber. Korequee joined her there, the two Sangheili staring out far above the human city's skyline. From the C&C they were just cresting the planet lower troposphere and had an unparalleled view of the stars.

"Do you believe this is what true ascension feels like?" Ikarshree mused, "To be poised on the cusp of unlimited power, true Godhood. The freedom to stand atop the soil of a world and scoop the very stars from the sky or look down on entire universe nestled within the palm of your hand."

Korequee gave thought to her words, imagining himself a literal giant towering above a plain of mortals. The image provoked a sensation of



nauseas dread, which turned to outright horror when he imagined the High Priestess in possession of such raw immaterial power. The humans clustered in city below would certainly be the first to be crushed beneath Ikarshree's heel, either out of cruel necessity, cold brutal logic or perhaps even for casual amusement.

Would Penance be the next?

Fleet Master Talsharnee?

Would the High Priestess turn her new found power on the Hierarch's, the High Council, the Jiralhanae or even Korequee himself? Where would she stop in her path for ultimate power, true immorality?

Silence reigned between them for a populously long moment, the world continuing to turn around them in an ever ceaseless axel of fate.

"I sense you have a question you wish to ask me Commander" Ikarshree mused, her attention still centred on the passing clouds.

"I ran a background check on you" Korequee replied, "You have quite a history."

Ikarshree turned towards him this time.

In her place Penance would have likely feigned the deepest offense whilst quietly concealing a roaring rage in his heart. Talsharnee on the other hand would have been unashamedly righteous in his indignation that a lowly 'ground brawler' would dare have the audacity to question his sincerity. Ikarshree was neither the Prophet nor the Fleet Master. The High Priestess clasped a claw like hand over her chest, her mandibles curling in cold amusement.

"And what did you find Commander?"

Korequee folded his arms, "You were in the Special Operation's Group."

Ikarshree visibly straightened, her hands falling to her hips as she cocked her head, "You seem surprised."

"Your family is wealthy" Korequee remarked, "Much wealthier then is commonly known. You could have had a fleet posting on any vessel or station of your choosing. A life of relative comfort for a warrior, dining with officials and dignitaries, vaporizing heretics and barbarians from the safety of a command bridge. A ship could have been yours in time, even a fleet. Instead you chose the most brutal and psychically demanding division of the Covenant military to join. Underage I might add."

Ikarshree lifted a curled hand to her mouth, chucking softly, "I'd almost forgotten about that."

Korequee tilted his head, his eye ridge rising sceptically.

Ikarshree clicked her lower mandibles, "My relationship with my parents back then was, let us just say it was strained at the best of times. They saw our race's mandatory service as beneath them and

wanted me to circumvent my own with the terrestrial legionnaires. They had in fact already made every preparation behind my back to exempt me from my duty, a full year in advance. When I found out I reacted in a way I hoped would hurt them the most, it was an act of pure spite Commander. Nothing more."

"An act of spite" Korequee remarked, "But it became something else. By all accounts you were an outstanding recruit. Top marks in marksmanship, perception and initiative. I understand during your time at the academy you were unchallenged in hand to hand combat. And then there was your active service record. Three tours of duty in the contested zones along the Pfhor border. Half a dozen engagements actions during our cold war with the Xenotines and counter insurgency operations on Doisac."

"And then came Septusk" Ikarshree mused, "An entire fortress world seized from within. Six million Jiralhanae rebels just waiting for a Covenant fleet to arrive and drive them out."

"Your unit was decimated?" Korequee stated rhetorically.

Ikarshree nodded, sighing in solemn agreement, "The plan seemed sound enough at the time. A pin point pre-emptive insertion by orbit to surface drop pods. The Special Operations brigade's would disable the planetary defence cannons and generators for the orbital platforms in preparation for a mass deployment by the legions. Unfortunately the Jiralhanae insurgents had already cracked the fleet's encryptions, no one ever found out how they did it but they knew exactly where our landings would be. Ninety percent of our troops were dead before they even hit the ground, the survivors were either scattered or hunted down."

"I completed massacre" Korequee replied, "and yet a single young female, isolated, cut off from supported and wounded, was able infiltrate the insurgent's lines all the way to the provisional palace and disable the entire planetary defence grid."

"And thus the legions descended in mass" Ikarshree responded humourlessly, "It was no longer a battle from that point, more a slaughter."

"It was your next action that surprised me the most" Korequee said, folding his arms as he regarded the High Priestess with no small hint of suspicion, "You resigned from your post. Spent a full cycle trailing the core worlds all the way to the outer rim, then you return to Sangheilios to enter the Convent of the Vestal Sisterhood."

This time it was Ikarshree who regarded the Korequee with sceptical eyes, her mandibles twitching in the slightest hint of a smile, "I had to pay my respects to the families of my unit, all those who had fallen at Septusk. They were a most diverse group of Sangheili, hailing from the proudest lineage to the humblest of backwater worlds. Their familia had to know how they died. As for my admission to the Sisterhood, I desired reflection on recent events. Septusk taught me a valuable lesson Commander. Force however justified seldom resolves conflict. The rebellion emerged beneath our hooves because of a failure to act on what we knew was wrong. Septusk's leader's imported Jiralhanae slave labour without pity or restraint, feeding an insurgency they knew was growing and forcing all including their

own people down a path which could only ever have lead to one inevitable outcome. Force Commander, ultimately proved a disaster to all who wielded it."

"An interesting conclusion" Korequee responded, tilting his head towards priestess, "If I was a legionnaire or Ship Master I may believe your words sincere, but we have both served within the same ranks priestess. The bond between the Sangheili of the Special Operation's Group is unlike any other, thicker then blood, ritual or contract. I've nurtured that relationship among thousands of warriors, seen in fostered and take root. Were I in your position Ikarshree and had I experienced your loss, I would have spent the rest of my days hunting down every Jiralhanae who could even spell a Septuskian insurgent's name."

Ikarshree smiled again, her voice sombre, "I had such thoughts" she mused, "But such a path would not have raised my fallen kin from where they fell. It would have been an act of barbaric vengeance motivated by selfish loss, an insult to the memories of those I loved. Once I understood this Commander, I learnt to forgive even those rebels who massacred my brothers and sisters on Septusk."

Korequee inhaled sharply, "I find that hard to believe."

Ikarshree cocked her head towards him, "It is the truth Commander. They were fighting for something they truly believed in, and I would be lying if I denied their reasons for rising against us whilst misguided were not wholly unjustified. Would it surprise you to know Chieftain Vorackus was at Septusk."

Her words took Korequee by surprise, "An auxiliary?"

"An insurgent Commander. He held command over an anti-orbital battery, one within my own drop zone in fact. As I understand his crew achieved the highest kill ratio of any on the planet that day, he likely killed a large number of my friends."

"And the traitor still lives?" Korequee gasped, unable to keep the incredulity from his voice as his hand strayed to the deactivated energy sword at his waist. He was tempted to go and find the Jiralhanae turncoat their and then.

The touch of Ikarshree's hand, her long claw like fingers curling about his shoulder brought Korequee back to the present as he found himself looking into her eyes.

"As I said Commander, Vorackus has built his career upon the enemies he has made. He was one of the few to be taken alive at Septusk, and our leaders decried his continued service would be a better penance then his death. I hold no love for the Chieftain, but I cannot hate him simply for his actions that day. He was merely following orders that I would have followed in his place."

Korequee parted his mandibles, about to respond when fate overtook them.

"Commander!"

Korequee and Ikarshree turned back towards the C&C. The voice had

come from a cobalt armoured Sangheili poised over the orbital auspex display.

"What is it?" Korequee barked.

"Slip space rupture" the technical officer announced, "high orbit, approximately two kilometres above the planets ionosphere."

Korequee was already moving towards the central auspex, Ikarshree right behind him. When he reached the station the seated Sangheili was a flurry of movement as his gloved hands danced across the numerous holo-screens unveloping from his consul.

"Someone get in touch with fleet command" Korequee ordered, "Find out what this thing is."

"Whatever it is it just passed the ionosphere" the technician reported, "tracking trajectory now."

"Excellency message from the fleet" a female Sangheili called from the comm.'s station, "no human capital ships have been detected but they are tracking a small object in high orbit about the size of an escape-pod or personnel insertion craft."

"That's not possible" Korequee hissed, "Get them to check again."

"Could it be a torpedo capable of being launched from slip space?" the technician asked.

Ikarshree shook her head, "It's far too small to mount a standard human slip space drive and there isn't a guidance system in the entire spiral arm sophisticated enough to plant a ship directly into a planets orbit."

"Excellency, the Master of Auspex has run a second scan system wide" the communication's officer reported, "Still no enemy vessels detected and they are requesting permission to shoot down the unidentified object."

"Negative" Korequee shouted, "Tell them permission denied. It's too small to guarantee a direct hit by laser and we have too many ground assets spread across the surface. If they miss they could end up vaporizing our own warriors. Tell them to hold fire. We'll intercept the object on the ground. Someone tell me where this thing is going to land."

"Tracking trajectory now" the technician replied, "at its current speed the object will strike just north of the capital city in approximately nine microt's. Commander that area is controlled by the Ministry of Resources private security detachments, we have no jurisdiction there."

"This could be human insertion team" Korequee replied, "Therefore it's a matter of planetary security which falls under military jurisdiction. Despatch a Special Operation's task force to secure the drop site and contact the nearest legionary units. It's imperative we get there before the Jiralhanae mercenaries do."

\* \* \*

><p>"Goodbye Alam"<p>

Alex rubbed at his eyes, the tears tricking down the back of his hand as he tried his best not to cry. He was far from the orphanage that night, far from the city and far from the wretched alien Covenant. It had taken him many hours to reach the sheltered woodlands north of the capital, and it would take him even longer to return. A part of Alex knew that Alam would have berated him for such foolishness, but Alam was gone.

He'd had to do this.

Against all logic and common sense Alex had needed to come here, to the last resting place of the only father he had ever known.

The clearing looked like any other in the forest, a circular glade covered in a thick layer of snow, the trees freshly cut. The ground was soft yet firm, the soil at first despoiled and then overturned whilst a lowly piled embankment ringed the glades edge.

Fifteen hundred humans were buried beneath the upturned soil, Alam among them.

The Covenant had not even bothered to separate the bodies. They had simply dumped them in mass into this wide circular grave.

Alex knelt at the edge of the clearing, reaching into his coat and withdrawing a small package that he proceeded to unwrap with cold numbed fingers. The Koran was a small antiquated book, its binding tattered and paper worn yet it had been the only thing that seemed of worth in Alam's deserted office. He'd apparently drawn some comfort from its words during his final days, and it had seemed right to Alex that it should be with the doctor in death.

Alex cleared the snow as best he could, digging into the frozen soil beneath with his bare fingers and grimacing as he tore a nail against a jutting stone. Eventually the packed dirt gave way to softer earth, enabling him to clear a space sufficient for what he needed. Solemnly Alex lifted the book, his fingertips absently glancing the faded gold that stitched the covering. He squeezed the book beneath the soil, piling the upturned earth and snow atop it. In a moment it was done, the clearing unchanged as if its surface had never been touched.

Alex rose to his feet, stifling further tears.

"Sleep Alam" he whispered, "I love you."

The night was deathly silent around him. Alex wiped the last of the tears from his eyes, glancing up towards the sky. The swollen clouds had parted above him, and Alex could see the stars. They twinkled in the silence, both beautiful and cruel in their indifference to the savage darkness that engulfed his world.

One star in particular caught Alex's attention.

It burned in the night sky like a new born sun, where it had only been shimmering a moment before.

Alex curled his lips, lifting a hand to shield his eyes as he watched the shooting star pass.

Accept it didn't!

A tiny burst of light erupted at the far edge of the sky.

Alex could see flame, smoke and a mass of molten silver too clear to be a star.

With a roaring \_whoosh\_ of pressure the object tore its way through the lower atmosphere, the bloated clouds parting to vapour in its wake. Alex took an involuntary step back in fright, his vision blotched and painful against the sudden light. From the corner of his eyes he saw the thing, whatever it was flash above the forest's edge a moment before the terrible crash.

A wave of heat exploded across the glade. Snow melted, wood cracked and for just a moment night became day.

Alex remained at the glade's edge, the exposed skin on his face and hands warm to the touch despite the cold Carthaginian winter. Slowly the night took back the clearing, the light from the forest's edge diminishing to a lowly burning ember.

Before Alex consciously knew what he was doing, his feet were moving him in the direction of the distant light. Slowly he made his way along the glade's edge, fumbling over the steep embankment that rose at the clearing's far edge.

His vision still swam with a teary haze, his night sight ruined by the sudden burst of illumination. The ground before him was a blotchy unclear thing, melded with trees, roots and scrub.

He never saw the brutes until he all but walked into straight them.

"\_What have we here!\_"

Alex barely had a chance to scream as a huge fur matted hand clamped around his throat, the alien's wiry fingers almost choking him as he was lifted from the ground.

With a thick guttural snort his captor hefted Alex one handed and thrust him backwards pinning Alex against the closest tree, his backpack tumbling a full six feet to the ground beneath him.

The small boy fought back as best he could, clawing and kicking at meaty arm attached to the hand that was choking him. He heard voices in front of him, deep throaty chortles that could have been laughter as the blinding white haze in his eyes solidified into two swarthy figures clad in darkly matted fur and combat webbing.

"\_It's like being attacked by an intoxicated Unggoy\_" the first brute laughed, his words heavily accented but clear.

"\_Lively little vermin isn't he\_" laughed the second brute as he reached for something at his waist, "\_A little scrawny for my taste, but my belly aches for meat."\_"

"\_Cooked?" \_the brute holding Alex asked\_, "Or Raw?"\_

His companion chuckled as he drew a full length of silver from his belt. Alex's eyes widened at the sight of the glinting blade in the moonlight and in that moment true fear overcame him.

At the very edge of his peripheral vision, unnoticed by all but the boy's subconscious something was moving towards them.

"\_Why wait?" \_his captor's companion decided, \_"Limb, or breast?"\_

The first brute's fang filled maw opened in a malevolent parody of a human grin, a silver bayonet of steel suddenly appearing in other hand,\_ "I want his heart."\_

Alex scrunched shut his eyes, his lips trembling as he twisted his head towards his shoulder. Neither the brutes nor the human child noticed the very slight vibration in the tree Alex was pinned against as something took position in the thick branches above them.

Tensing himself against the bark to his back Alex braced his tongue between his teeth, his nails digging into the palms of his hands just as he felt the alien's blade touch his skin.

The brute let loose a sudden agonized scream as hot arterial blood splashed against Alex's face. Opening his eyes Alex saw his captor reeling backwards, blood spurting from a fleshy raw stump where the alien's forearm had been only a moment before. He was also aware he was falling an instant before his legs stuck the hard roots at the base of the tree below him. In that fraction of a second he saw the brutes twisting to face a shadowy figure cloaked in the wraith like silhouette of a man which had suddenly materialised between them.

The first brute was bellowing some incoherent curse, the bayonet in his other hand striking towards his attacker's throat. The shadow wielded a blade of its own, and was already in the process countering the Covenant soldier's initial thrust. The brute let out another tormented scream as the shimmering blade cut through his wrist like a bread knife slicing through vapour. The shadow was already reversing its stroke as the brute was lurching backwards and in one impossibly smooth motion took the off the warrior leg above his knee. Thick alien blood pooled across the snow as the brute staggered.

He never had a chance to scream.

Arching the shadowy outline of the blade across its shoulders the figure clasped both its hands around the sword's hilt and struck straight for the creature's throat. Alex saw the brute's head come off in a fountain of blood as the decapitated, almost limbless torso tumbled to the ground. His former captor would never threaten anyone again, and it had all happened in the time it took for a human heart to beat.

The second brute screamed its rage as its companion's grisly demise, a curved alien rifle grasped in its thick paw like hands. With its back to the now primary attacker, the shadow did not wait for the brute to take aim and nor did it turn to face the warrior. Flipping the silhouetted blade in its palm the figure brought the sword's tip

around in a perfect semicircle and thrust backwards beneath its own shoulder.

Alex saw the second brute die in a manner he never wished to see repeated, its feet dangling from the ground, impaled straight through its sternum and nailed to a tree thrashing like a helpless animal just before the shadow blade eviscerated its heart.

Alex could watch no longer. He scrambled to his knees, his trembling hands still speckled with the alien's blood as he tried to brace himself against the tree. The effort proved too much and for second time in three months Alex keeled towards his side and heaved the meagre contents of his stomach onto the snow.

The smell was the worst of it, bile and puke mixed with the raw scent of alien's blood and open flesh. Alex closed his eyes, willing himself to sleep and be swallowed by the long Carthaginian night.

A cold metallic hand brushed against his shoulder.

"\_\*\*Be still child"\*\*\_spoke the shadow, \_\*\*"You're safe now."\*\*\_

The voice was distorted, as warped and inhuman as the alien brute's Alex's unseen benefactor had just butchered, yet the young boy drew a strange comfort from the words.

Strong armoured fingers curled about Alex's arms, gently lifting him back to his feet and holding him steady when he stumbled. With trembling lips Alex lifted his head to look upon the shadow that just saved his life.

His saviour was no shadow, but Alex could neither be sure what he saw was a man. The silky moonlight gave the figure the silhouetted outline of a human, yet one who would tower above the tallest of men. Alex caught the glancing flash of armour, viciously slanted around the figures shoulders and joints.

His helm was what unsettled Alex most of all. Even in the darkness it was a twisted and cruel thing, more the mask of a beast than that of a man.

The figure reached towards him, his cold armoured finger and thumb curling around the young boys chin. Tenderly yet firmly he twisted Alex's head, first to the left and then to the right.

With a course grunt the figure released his chin, \_\*\*"You are unharmed."\*\*\_

His saviour folded his arms, twisting his dread helm first towards the bodies of the brutes and then towards the open glade. Silence reigned between them for a few seconds before the figure spoke again.

"\_\*\*Jiralhanae, why do I know their race?"\*\*\_he remarked softly.

It took Alex a few seconds to make the connection. The question had been rhetorical, he was talking about the brutes.

"\_\*\*And you should not have been here this night"\*\*\_the figure continued, cocking his head back towards Alex, \_\*\*"Not a



discrimination you deserve I sense, yet one they would have killed you for regardless. It matters little to them now yet I am still curious, in the middle of the night why do I find you child in this forest alone?"\*\*\_

"I" Alex began, his words mumbled and rushed. The figure gestured for him to pause and start again, "I came to say goodbye."

"\_\*\*They took someone from you?"\*\*\_the figure asked. Again the question was rhetorical. The shadow swept his helm towards the glade, no doubt taking in the freshly piled spoil at the edge of the clearing, \_\*\*"They are buried here, among many are they not?"\*\*\_

Alex nodded in agreement, a single tear slipping down his cheek.

"\_\*\*There at peace child"\*\*\_the figure said, \_\*\*"Draw comfort from that truth. The dead don't suffer, the living yet may."\*\*\_

In the darkness, miles from the city and stranded in the middle of a forest with a creature he was not entirely sure was human, Alex did indeed draw a strange sense of warmth from those simple words.

It was not to last.

The figure's head snapped suddenly towards distant horizon, the shimmering blade of darkness materializing in his hand seemingly from nowhere, \_\*\*"More come."\*\*\_

He was right!

Alex could see them now. A line of bulbous lights in the darkness, the strobing beams of torch mounted plasma rifles illuminating the open canopy from one end of the woodlands to the other.

The brutes had merely been scouts. The Covenant were sweeping the forest in mass.

"There here" Alex cried, "There'll find us."

"\_\*\*They will try child"\*\*\_the figure replied as he grasped an armoured hand down on Alex shoulder, \_\*\*"The God's are undecided as to our fate."\*\*\_

Before Alex could speak his unseemly guardian turned towards him and knelt down. Even crouched on one knee the figure still towered above him.

"\_\*\*Listen to me now and I will see you safely from these woods. These beasts hunt that which they cannot see. They expect us to give into our fear, to be bracketed to a place of their choosing to be slaughtered at their leisure. Instead I want you to stay firm. Cross this glade now while time is our ally, secrete yourself beneath a tree and wait until they pass, do you understand?"\*\*\_

Alex nodded in response, doing his best to suppress that terror that clawed at his insides. The figure reached towards him again, grasping Alex hand in his own gauntlet and placing it over the boy's heart.

"\_\*\*Keep your hand here, and count in your head. Once the pace of the numbers in your head matches the beating of your heart, weight exactly a hundred beats and then rise. These beasts will be long gone by this time, I will make sure of that. Make your way back from whence you came with shadow and silence. I will find you when this is over child, I promise you."\*\*\_

With those words the figure rose, guiding Alex away with a gentle shove, \_\*\* "Go!"\*\*\_

Alex did exactly as he was told, sprinting across the glade. On the other side of the piled embankment he slipped beneath the roots of a half submerged tree. He could hear the Covenant soldiers now, the course hisses of alien voices, the soft crunch of snow underfoot, they were very close now.

Alex closed his eyes, and began to count.

\_One, two, three...\_

## 7. Chapter 5 - (Part II)

\*\*Chapter 5 â€" Shooting Star (Part II)\*\*

With a smooth chop of her hand Veskeriee signalled for them to halt.

Nakitee took position behind the closest tree, falling to one knee as she swept the adjacent ridgeline with her storm rifle. Around her a full two dozen Sangheili terrestrial legionnaires and Kig-yar auxiliaries did the same, making use of whatever cover they could find.

Beneath her helm Nakitee scanned the surrounding forest with her night vision, studying the motion tracker at the bottom of her display every few seconds for any sign of movement. The clearing was deathly quiet, nothing larger than a dune bug could have been out there.

"What is it?" one of the terrestrials hissed.

Veskeriee was still poised at the front of their patrol, her claw like hand raised towards them in warning. Gingerly their commander twisted her head towards the open canopy and sniffed the air.

Nakitee saw Veskeriee's mandibles curl inwards before she spoke.

"Stalkers" she growled.

The Jiralhanae stealth pack materialized in front of them a moment later, the air around them still crackling with negative energy discharges from their active camouflage. There were at least a dozen of them.

The Sangheili immediately raised their weapons as did the Jiralhanae, the Kig-yar auxiliaries following suit a moment later.

"Hold!" shouted Veskeriee, her own storm rifle still pointed towards the lead stalker, "Who's in command here?"

One of the Jiralhanae, a mauled pistol gripped in his meaty fist detached himself from the main pack and made his way down from the ridgeline. Lowering her own rifle Veskeriee gave no indication that the terrestrials or auxiliaries should lower theirs.

"You're trespassing in a secure security zone" the Jiralhanae officer growled, "Leave immediately!"

"We're here under orders from Central Command" Veskeriee replied, "We believe a human infiltration team may have inserted itself into these woods and have orders to sweep the whole area."

The Jiralhanae reached up and curled its thick fingers beneath the neck guard of his cyclop like helmet to remove his battle helm. Nakitee glimpsed a deep scar crisscrossing the warrior's right eye, the fur neatly cut around his nose and cheeks as if to highlight the disfigurement.

"This area is sectioned by order of the Ministry of Resource" the Jiralhanae repeated, "If you refuse to leave we will remove you by force."

If he hoped such words would entice Veskeriee to violence, he was mistaken. The Sangheili Domino threw back her head and laughed, the storm rifle still pointing towards the ground at her side, "I take my orders from the Fleet Master Jiralhanae, not the Prophet of Penance. We have three entire lances sweeping the woods plus fire support and another five on the way. Central Command has already dispatched retrievals teams from the Spire. Unless you have nothing short of a cohort here you're not going to stop us."

The Jiralhanae officer growled something utterly intelligible beneath his breath, his warriors shifting angrily behind him. Nakitee's claw like forefinger curled around the trigger guard of her rifle, her sisters doing likewise around her. If it came down to it the Jiralhanae had a reasonably good field of fire on them, but the Sangheili had numbers, cover and superior shielding. It would be a bloody but brief fight.

It never came to pass.

"Contact!" one of terrestrial legionnaire's hissed, "Right flank."

Sangheili, Jiralhanae and Kig-yar swung towards the direction she had indicated, weapons raised. The Sangheili who had shouted the warning, their section's designated sharpshooter was already crouched on her knee, her beam rifle pointed towards the forest's edge. Nakitee followed her line of sight with her own retina display, glimpsing movement amongst the foliage.

"Human" the terrestrial sniper reported, "Minor."

Nakitee caught the human youngling in her own crosshairs as it stumbled, catching a fleeting glimpse of child's face. One twelfth of a cycle ago she wouldn't have been able to identify any human from

another, but in that sickening moment she knew this child was the same one she had searched all those weeks ago, the same one who had tried to vault the barricade at the executions.

"Must be a vagrant" the terrestrial commented, "Should I kill it?"

"It may have seen something" Veskeriee replied, "We'll need to interrogate it. Put a round through its leg. Below the knee, flesh wound only."

"With pleasure" the sniper said, readjusting her aim.

Nakitee clenched her mandibles.

Should she try and stop them?

Could she if she tried?

Hadn't she already placed herself in enough risk to protect this stupid human child that seemed so intent on its own demise?

Before Nakitee could decide the Sangheili sharpshooter curled her clawed forefinger around her beam rifle's trigger, exhaling just as she fired.

The Terrestrial's head flew apart in a grisly rupture of arterial blood, armour fragment and bone. With her forefinger still clutching trigger the dead Sangheili's shot went wide, a violet beam of purple light lancing into the sky as the corpse tumbled onto its side.

"Contact left!" someone shouted, "Contact left!"

The surviving Covenant warriors scattered to cover, Nakitee herself diving into the low foliage that carpeted the forest grounds.

A Jiralhanae was the next to die. Nakitee saw the mercenary twisting on his heels, bringing his own rifle to bear on the darkened woods. A glancing beam of light took the warrior in the chest and ripped straight through his torso, the sheer force of the blow pitching him backwards head over heels.

"Return fire" Veskeriee roared.

None of them needed any encouraging. Over thirty Covenant warriors opened up in mass drenching the distant tree line with a withering volley of plasma fire. One of the Kig-yar auxiliaries was pitched backwards with a blood curdling scream as a third beam of energy arched out from the tree line and severed his arm at the elbow.

"It's not a projectile" one of the terrestrials screamed, "They've got an energy weapon!"

Impossible Nakitee thought as she squeezed off a volley from her own storm rifle in the direction of their attacker The humans use projectiles, slug throwers. Not directed energy weapons.

Yet the evidence was plain to see. As if in direct countermand to her

argument, a second Kiy-yar scout was cut down as she tried to make her way towards her fallen comrade. Half a dozen of the wily little creatures stormed towards their fallen kin from both angles, deploying their cobalt and ochre wrist shields into a single overlapping shield wall.

It was with true astonishment that Nakitee watched as another lancing beam of energy sliced straight through the lead Kig-yar's shield and exploded the back of his skull. There wasn't a single small arm in the entire Covenant arsenal that could smash through a full strength point defence gauntlet in one shot.

With the death of their squad leader the remaining Kig-yar auxiliaries fell back, loosing shots from their plasma pistols as they went.

"Contacted sighted" Veskeriee shouted, "Far right!"

Nakitee followed her officer's directions, her eyes picking over the hail of plasma bolts stitching the distant tree line. With an ear-splitting crack a great tree crashed to the ground, the sheer weight tearing its roots from soil and upending the ridgeline. Nakitee saw a figure, roughly human in shape but sinisterly tall vault over the tree as it fell.

"The Vermin is disengaging" Veskeriee howled, "Pursue and engage, I want it alive!"

Leaving a small detachment to guard the wounded, the rest of the Sangheili, Jiralhanae and Kig-yar charged into the night. Their blood was up, adrenaline pumping throughout their bodies.

They'd sighted a worthy prey, too worthy perhaps and they wanted vengeance.

The small human child was all but forgotten in their minds.

\* \* \*

><p>"Target is moving north!"<p>

Juha' Relusee grimaced beneath his sealed helm as the Phantom banked sharply above the forest canopy, his tortured ribs flexing beneath his combat harness. He was pretty sure 'light duties' didn't encompass search and destroy missions against human commando units. Healer Sequesha would certainly not be amused.

Eight fully equipped Sangheili Special Operation warriors waited crouched in the centre of the Phantom's troop bay, whilst two Unggoy support gunners and four designated Kig-yar snipers waited on the gunships side sponsors ready to provide fire support. Rising from his seat Relusee shimmied his way towards the lip of the open flight deck, Texlusee and Tasolmee joining him there a moment later.

Three Covenant Phantoms swept over the darkened woodlands, the light from both the human city and Central Spire a distant flicker on the horizon. Beneath him Relusee could make out the telltale glow of Covenant patrols moving through the shrub and trees, at least three full strength lances plus auxiliary support units.

"This is Legionnaire Ahrmonree" a female Sangheili's voice crackled over the comm.'s, "We have a second target sighted to the east. It's moving south."

"This is Veskeriee" replied a second voice, "Target is the same I repeat target is the same, it's doubled back. All units converge and get those blasted Jiralhanae out of the way."

A muted chorus of angry hisses and coarse language came over the internal comm.'s channel as beneath him Relusee saw the patrol change directions south.

"Terrestrials" Texlusee shook her head, "Couldn't organize an orgy in a brothel."

The terrestrial named Ahrmonree activated her comm.'s link just as a volley of plasma fire tore through the jungle canopy, the pressurised whoosh of Covenant small arms fire drowning out the terrestrial's next words.

"We've been engaged" someone screamed, "...and...are down...passed straight through their shields."

"Pilot" Relusee roared over his shoulder, "Have the squadron converge on their flank, bring us right down behind them."

Inside her sealed compartment their pilot banked the gunship into a sharp rotary turn as her co-pilot slaved the Phantom's plasma turrets to his interface. They came in over where the majority of the fire fight seemed to be concentrated, the other two gunships taking up support positions on their flanks.

"Bring us in as low as you can" Relusee ordered, turning towards the Special Operation warriors in the troop bay, "Don't bother with gravity chute, just jump."

Relusee didn't wait for them to respond. Twisting on his heel he clasped one gloved hand on the troop bay's support beam and vaulted the gun platform. The jump was a little higher than he expected, and a lot higher than any of the Academy's holo-scroll's recommended for a hostile 'hard landing.'

"...Jiralhanae converging on..." his comm.'s bead hissed, "...Demon..."

Relusee hit the ground at a roll, his ribs flaring in agony as he swept the undergrowth his carbine. Tasolmee landed behind him a moment later followed by Texlusee, Kilshree and the other four unit. The eight Sangheili formed a defensive ring with each warrior protected his or her kin's flanks with an overlapping field of fire.

"There!" Texlusee hissed. Perhaps fifty paces away Relusee could make out a dozen Jiralhanae mercenaries closing on a raised ridgeline where the trees met the embankment. There was cursing, the throaty bellowing of orders and then the first burst Covenant plasma fire.

"Down" Relusee roared, his warriors falling to their stomachs as scorching plasma bolts stitched the wooded canopy above. At first

glance the Jiralhanae contractors appeared to be firing their weapons with shocking indiscipline, blasting at anything that moved and narrowly missing each other in the crossfire. It was as Relusee activating his helmets magnifiers that he caught his first site of their target, a ferocious blur across his retina as it tore straight across the ridgeline and pulled one of the mercenaries down into the foliage in a violent clash of flailing limbs.

Relusee saw the human 'demon' rise from where the Jiralhanae had fallen and leap straight into the midst of the dead mercenary's snarling companions, and the very sight of the creature sent a distinctly unpleasant chill down his spine. The human was as tall as any Jiralhanae or Sangheili and clad in a full fitting suit of viciously slanted body armour with brutal looking spikes angling out from the joint and shoulder guards. In one hand the warrior gripped what appeared to be a curved alien battle rifle, the other clutched some form of Covenant heavy assault cannon that Relusee could not make out. He watched as the alien turned towards the advancing mercenaries with impossible speed, twisting its body to the ground as the Jiralhanae opened fire. Their rounds sailed straight over the human commando, his strange battle rifle already thrust towards them. The four contractors were shredded in the return fire, the alien's rifle pumping out a lancing beam of radiant green energy fire. Even before their ruined bodies had hit the ground the human had twisted its body into a full spiral turn dodging the fire from the surviving mercenaries in a display of dexterous agility which had to be seen to be believed. He landed in the midst of three Jiralhanae, the first of which fell with his skull split open before his companions had scarcely had time to turn to their attacker. The second died with a searing energy bolt to his chest from the human's rifle. The third had just enough time to draw his bayonet before the demon swept downwards with his assault cannon and smashed out the Jiralhanae's legs from under him before reversing his posture a planting a single energy round from his rifle straight between the contractor's eyes.

A phantom gunship suddenly appeared above the forest canopy, the upper branches of the highest trees parting beneath its searing afterburners as the gunship's three plasma turrets rotated towards the ridgeline. The surviving Jiralhanae used the distraction to scatter as the lone human turned towards the gunship, his back to the Sangheili. It was with a horrified clarity that Relusee recognized just what type of assault cannon he was carrying.

"Field Officer Relusee" the Phantom's pilot reported, "We're locked on to the target."

"Negative" Relusee shouted into his comm.'s link "Do not engage, fall back..."

The tri-barrelled Fuel-Rod cannon was not a standard infantry armament, yet Relusee knew specialist Jiralhanae contractors favoured them as a heavy support weapon. He watched in surreal motion as the human 'demon' sighted the captured Fuel-Rod cannon one handed on the gunship and fired.

The first round of irradiated transparent gel arched upwards and punched straight through the Phantom's armoured viewport, exploding inside the sealed cockpit. As the gunship pitched drunkenly to the left shearing through one of the high trees its fully charged plasma

cannons let loose with their payload's hosing the surrounding woodlands with blind plasma fire.

"Down" Relusee shouted, the Sangheili throwing themselves to the forest floor as a heavy plasma round roared over them and exploded a tree scarcely a yard to their rear, showering the warriors with superheated bark and ash. His ears still ringing from the explosion, Relusee glanced up to see the demon offload a second volley of luminous ochre fuel rods straight into the Phantom's midsection. The troop deck was now on fire and Relusee saw one of the Kig-yar support gunners fly out of the gunship's compartment, limbs twisting like a limp rag-doll as it smacked wetly into a tree. The Phantom's entered its final death roll, its nose pitching downwards as it plummeted towards the ground. Relusee saw the demon turn towards them, discarding the spent fuel rod cannon with an almost casual disdain a moment before the gunship smashed prow first into the ground behind it engulfing the entire ridgeline into a roiling ball of flame.

Nothing living could have survived that impact. Relusee still believed that sentiment even as he saw the demon emerge from the roaring flames at a run and launch itself off the embankment, somersaulting straight over his warriors before landing to their rear.

"Target sighted" called a Sangheili's voice over the comm.'s. By sheer luck or perhaps even the will of the God's two fourunits of Special Operation's warriors appeared over the neighbouring crest, at least four Jiralhanae following in their wake.

"Engage" Relusee screamed, "Kill it!"

The demon did not hesitate, it charged straight for the nearest fourunit dodging around their plasma fire with an almost ethereal agility. It was on the first Sangheili before Relusee had even risen to his hooves, tearing the warrior from his concussion rifle before landing a bone crunching palm thrust to his solar plexus that sent the armoured Sangheili tumbling to the ground.

"Come on" Relusee hissed, his ears still ringing as he roused his own dazed warriors. Tasolmee and Texlusee were already on their hooves, still slightly dazed but otherwise unshaken.

"Press forward" Relusee was already running, "Close quarters, take it hard and fast!"

Kilshree and two of the other Special Operation warriors were still finding their bearing however Tasolmee, Texlusee and the two remaining Sangheili were already pushing forward hard on Relusee's heels.

The demon cut down a Jiralhanae even as it was turning to face them, blasting away one of the Special Operation warriors beside Relusee with an almost cursory volley from its stolen concussive rifle. Return fire from the surviving Special Operation warriors caused the human to back step just as a plasma round grazed its shoulder. A burst of light erupted around the warrior violently slapping aside the plasma round.

\_Reflective energy shielding\_ Relusee thought, \_How? That technology



is just theoretical. How could this human...\_

The demon staggered as two Jiralhanae converged on it from opposite sides. Up until that moment the alien warrior's every action had seemed as well timed and precise as that of a well rehearsed combat dancer at the peak of their physical condition. Now it had made its first mistake.

The first of the Jiralhanae to close with the demon lunged forward with his strike rifle, the serrated blades on the carbine edge slashing towards the human's stomach. The demon side stepped the first blow, grasped the rifle's barrel with its free hand before smashing its heel into the brute's kneecap. The Jiralhanae howled as it staggered to the ground and in the time it took Relusee to blink the demon twisted the arm gripping its own rifle and cut down the second Jiralhanae from behind. Without further etiquette or adieu the human turned back towards the kneeling Jiralhanae and smashed its helm straight into the mercenary's face, first once, then twice and then in rapid succession a third and final crack.

Relusee heard the sickening crunch of bone and cartilage snapping open like twigs.

The Jiralhanae pitched backwards like a woollen toy, dead or comatose Relusee could not tell.

The four Sangheili opened fire at the same moment but the demon had already turned and was running towards them, dodging their fire with impossible speed and grace. It went straight for their fellow surviving Special Operation warrior first, landing a powerful forearm blow to his chest that lifted the Sangheili fully off the ground with its shear force and sent him spiralling down the embankment. Relusee, Texlusee and Tasolmee brought their weapons to bare, the two male's shots going wide whilst Texlusee was able to land a particle beam straight into the demon's chest.

As before the warrior staggered but within a heartbeat it had recovered its stance. Faster than Relusee could react its rifle was angling towards the sniper and firing. The luminous green beam lanced straight into Texlusee's particle rifle, exploding the weapon in a shower of sparks and flame that sent the female reeling to the ground, clutching at her melted gauntlets.

Tasolmee let out an almost feral roar, threw aside his own Focus rifle and charged forwards tackling the human point blank. At almost two hundred kilograms Tasolmee was among one of the most physically strongest Sangheili Relusee knew and he fully expected him to crush the human warrior into the ground. Instead the demon held its ground as Tasolmee smashed straight into its midsection, its boots firmly rooted to the soil below as it locked its powerful arms around Tasolmee's waist.

With a slow deliberate jerk the demon twisted its neck from one shoulder to the other, loosening the muscles in its spine with an almost careless contempt. Quicker than Relusee could blink the human warrior struck down with its forearm smashing its elbow into the small of Tasolmee's back. The powerful Sangheili exhaled painfully before the human landed a second blow with its knee straight into Tasolmee's stomach before flipping the huge warrior over his shoulder as if he had been little more than a sack of rice. Tasolmee was left

writhing on the ground, gasping for air.

Relusee had discarded his own storm rifle and was drawing his energy sword as the demon was turning towards Tasolmee, angling its rifle towards the injured warrior. It twisted back towards him at the last moment, narrowly avoiding the sweeping curve of his blade that Relusee had meant for the abominations throat. The human reeled backwards, discarding its own energy rifle as it reached forward grasping Relusee gauntlet in its armoured fingers. The two grappled for a moment, the blade a mere inch from the demon's throat before a powerful right hook smashed into Relusee's jaw.

The Sangheili staggered backwards, blood seeping from his lower mandibles as he spat out a broken tooth. In that small opening the demon was suddenly upon him, a curved blade comprised seemingly of shimmering darkness gripped in one hand, and suddenly Relusee was on the defensive as their swords clashed.

The demon drove him back with such ferocity that Relusee could barely keep the flickering blade in his sight, and in the corner of his helmet's combat display the triple figures that monitored his energy sword's own strength were plummeting. Whatever kind of energy the demon's blade was comprised off, it was draining his sword's energy reserves fast.

He back stepped and blocked as the demon landed a powerful overhead blow, pushing away the alien's strange blade at last moment. Relusee struck back with a downward stroke that the demon scraped aside with his own blade before twisting, the sword leaping from one gauntleted hand to the other as he curved his blade straight towards the Sangheili's open flank. Relusee's sword arm swept across his chest, countering the thrust a moment before it would have cleaved him from hip to shoulder. Again their blades met, the twin prongs of his energy sword catching the demon's own between them.

The human's sword arm was pinned.

Relusee let loose a triumph roar as he ripped back the enemy's sabre, the plasma blade built into the gauntlet of his other arm flaring to life as he aimed as savage downward stroke towards the warrior's throat.

The demon was already in front of him, it's strange war helm glaring at him through its malevolent little iris's even as an armoured fist smashed into his solar plexus. He both felt and heard his armour's dermal seal and breastplate crack.

Relusee's tumbled backwards, the hilt of his energy sword all but falling from his fingers as he was forced into a crouch, clutching at his throbbing side as the demon loomed above him, sword held high in one hand as it prepared for the death blow that he knew he could not escape.

A handful of paces behind the demon Tasolmee was still struggling to rise to his hooves. From the corner of his eye Relusee knew Texlusee was fumbling with her sidearm, her burned claws trying desperately to curl around the plasma pistol that was on the wrong side of her combat belt. Neither of them could intervene in time to save him.

"Relusee!" roared a voice.

A plasma round smashed into the demon's back. It staggered as a second round punched into its shoulder.

Kilshree charged the human demon from behind, storm rifle gripped in his claws as he fired off two more plasma rounds, each one scoring a direct hit on the demon's armour. The human warrior turned, taking the full force of the next three rounds on the armour of his chest, his back to the Sangheili. Relusee's hand tightened around the hilt of his sword. His enemy's shields were weakened, it's strange energy rifle discarded. He was vulnerable.

Blade in one hand, the demon lifted its other arm, the smooth panelling on its gauntlet sliding back to reveal a green crystalline emitter. It took a fraction of a second for the energy weapon concealed in the gauntlet to power up.

Relusee lurched forward, his mandibles parting as he tried to warn his brother off.

"Kilshree get..."

The demon fired.

The beam that left the human's wrist took Kilshree straight through his neck. The young Sangheili warrior dropped his storm rifle, his gloved hands suddenly reaching for his throat where blood was spurting like an open geyser. Kilshree toppled forward, his eyes rolling up behind the lenses of his helmet and Relusee instinctively knew that he was dead.

"Nooooo!" Texlusee screamed.

Something ancient and primeval stirred deep within Relusee's soul. He was up and moving before Kilshree's body had even struck the ground, the burning pain in his ribs suddenly forgotten as he arched his energy sword straight towards the demon's neck.

The human twisted to face him a moment before Relusee would have sliced his head from his shoulders, the warrior's own shimmering blade clashing against his own in a luminous burst of light. Relusee lunged forward before his enemy had truly recovered from his initial strike, absent thought for his own safety and preying only for death of this single human.

"Die demon!" Relusee roared, thrusting his energy blade downwards straight at the human's chest, "and fall where you stand!"

The demon scraped away Relusee's descending stroke by a hairsbreadth, both of his armoured hands curled around the hilt of his own blade as the twin prongs of Relusee's sword scraped his chestplate. It was the first true blow anyone had landed on this creature that night, and it confirmed one thing to the Sangheili; the demon's shields were down.

Relusee drove the human back with a feral volley of blows that almost had the sodden creature on its knees. He could not say where this sudden reserve of raw energy had come from, but Relusee knew that it had not only bolstered his exhaustion but had enhanced his speed and

strength to level he never thought possible. By comparison by the demon's own seemingly inexhaustible supply of stamina and adrenaline had slackened, his once flawless movements were sluggish and slow to the Sangheili's eyes.

Relusee's only real concern was the strength of his own blade. The counter that displayed the energy reserves being fed into his sword's matrix chamber were already in the lowly double figures. He knew the energy sword could only maintain a reliable form for a good handful more seconds.

He had to finish this now.

Relusee swept aside a desperate blow that had been swung clumsily towards his chest, forcing the demon back a step as he smashed aside the human's return stroke, the demon's wrist snapping backwards. The human saw Relusee sweep up his sword towards his opposing flank and swapped his sword from one hand to the other to deflect the blow.

It was the wrong move to make and exactly the one Relusee had been expecting.

Flipping his own wrist Relusee withdrew the feint as the demon's blade went wide, both the arching sweep and the precious second it had taken to execute an utter waste which left the demon's opposing side vulnerable. Sweeping up his blade Relusee thrust straight at the demon's side, plunging straight towards the human's open flank and...

Relusee's thrust stalled, his sword hilt suddenly rigid and tight against his enclosed palm. He blinked, the tipped prongs of his energy sword were but a hairsbreadth from the human's hip, the uppermost prong gripped tightly in the armoured fingers of the human's gauntleted fist.

\_That wasn't possible!\_

Relusee glanced upwards, catching sight the demon's death mask. Their eyes met and instantly Relusee knew he had been tricked.

The demon's armoured helm smashed straight into Relusee's face, snapping the Sangheili's head back with an agonizing jerk. Claspings the energy sword with both hands the demon used the blade as a pivot to pitch Relusee from his hooves and hurl him over his shoulder, sending the Sangheili crashing to the ground as the sword finally gave out and evaporated between them.

This time Relusee actually felt his ribs break and blood pool inside his combat harness, his single lung seemingly on fire inside his chest. Coughing violently Relusee struggled to his knees, retching blood inside his own helm. He glimpsed Kilshree's body still crumpled miserably on the ground. The young warrior had been his charge, his responsibility. He hadn't been able to protect him, and nor had he been able to avenge him.

The demon was standing in front of him now, his shimmering energy sword clasped in both hands vertically above him.

"You wanted me to believe" Relusee hissed in the human's tongue, "That I had you beaten."

The demon cocked its head, the blade still held high, \_"You were skilled sword wielder Sangheili"\_ it replied, in Relusee's own tongue, \_"But your over confidence proved to be your weakness."\_

Relusee gasped.

How could it speak Sanghelian?

The demon paused, its helm suddenly angling over the Sangheili's kneeling form. In the sodden darkness and silence of the forest Relusee was suddenly conscious to the thunder of approaching footfalls.

The demon leapt backwards, his blade sweeping up in a defensive arc.

"Move aside!" roared a throaty voice.

Relusee was suddenly aware that he was being barged aside, and as he fell to the ground he saw a towering Jiralhanae Chieftain clutching a crackling gravity hammer storming over him towards the demon, two more Jiralhanae sweeping forth from his flanks. In the distance behind the demon he caught site of movement, Sangheili he thought.

The world darkened around him but as they came closer he was sure of it. They were Sangheili, three terrestrial legionnaires, females, converging on the demon from behind as the Jiralhanae stormed it from the front.

Unable to fight the pain or darkness any longer, Relusee lost consciousness.

\* \* \*

><p>The ground was strewn with the dead and the dying.<p>

Sangheili, Jiralhanae and Kig-yar blood mixed and clotted atop the packed snow. Broken weapons and damaged armour was strewn across the clearing like discarded refuse atop a polar scrap heap. There were at least a dozen bodies, all of them noble Covenant warriors condemned to an inglorious and bloody end.

And their murder still stood!

"Spread out" Nakitee shouted, gesturing with a rapid wave of her hand as the three Sangheili stormed into the clearing. The two terrestrials with her were neither of her section or cohort. She did not know their names yet the three had found themselves separated from their units and in closest proximity when Chieftain Vorackus had called for their aid. During her time on Nu Carthage Nakitee had heard many less then flattering rumours regarding the Jiralhanae Chieftain's past, yet few could doubt his bravery or those of his mercenaries.

The Jiralhanae charged the human 'demon' that had struck down so many of their comrades (as well as her own) head on, with no hint of fear or self preservation. It would be to their most grievous

loss.

Nakitee saw the first Jiralhanae mercenary die just as he closed to within striking distance of the human, the demon's shimmering blade all but slicing him in half from thigh to shoulder. Nakitee halted, lifting her carbine to her shoulder, her sister's following suit as the three Sangheili raised their weapons and fired.

Nakitee's first superheated plasma round smacked straight into the demon's shoulder forcing it backwards while her sister's shots went wide. Before they could even fire a second round the human was already moving towards them with impossible speed, its forearm raised. A lancing bolt of raw energy leapt forwards from the demon's gauntlet and arced towards the terrestrial on Nakitee's immediate right, the beam lacerating her shields and punching straight through her lower abdomen armour. The Sangheili fell with a thick guttural scream, Nakitee could not see if her wound was fatal or not.

Before the remaining two Sangheili could gain a bearing on it the demon was in front of the second terrestrial to Nakitee's left. She watched as the Sangheili dropped her storm rifle and withdrew her own curved combat blade. The human ducked her first lunge and swept upwards with a powerful overhead kick, its foot connecting with the back of her head. Nakitee heard a sickening crunch as the terrestrial was all but somersaulted to the ground by the raw force of the blow, her neck broken.

And suddenly the demon was upon her.

Nakitee struck out with the butt of her carbine. The demon swung aside the hasty blow and snatched the barrel of the carbine away with one armoured hand. Nakitee swung with her other arm, her fist cracking into the demon's faceplate as its head snapped back.

Faster than Nakitee could follow or react the human smashed an armoured palm into her chest. The thrust psychically lifted the eight foot Sangheili from her hooves and sent her flying backwards straight into a tree.

Nakitee grimaced as she sunk her knees, gripping her side in pain. As far as she could tell nothing was broken but she was badly winded.

The surviving Jiralhanae mercenary opened fire on the demon with his own strike rifle, stitching the demon's protective energy shielding with superheated metallic spikes.

The demon twisted around sweeping up Nakitee fallen Carbine before squeezing off three rounds at the Jiralhanae. The first two shots tore into the mercenary's chest above the sternum whilst the third punched straight into his forehead, blowing out the Jiralhanae's brains.

And then it was just the Chieftain and the demon.

Nakitee caught site of Vorackus in the clearing. He paced towards the demon slowly, his huge gravity hammer angled towards the sky. The two circled each other, the demon discarding her rifle and brandishing its shimmering single pronged energy sword.

They were talking.

Nakitee strained to listen.

"...head will make a fine addition to my collection vermin" Vorackus was sneering in the humans own tongue.

The demon was laughing, \_"...filthy primates never change. Tell me this then Jiralhanae. Do you really think you're the first to try to claim my head, or the thousandth?"\_

With that Vorackus was charging towards the demon, bellowing a might war cry as he swept his gravity hammer straight at the humans head. The demon's energy sword rose, and the two weapons collided with a thunderous crash that sent both warriors reeling.

Struggling to catch her breath Nakitee shakily rose to her hooves. Still clutching her side she stumbled forwards, exhaling deeply. The first terrestrial was still alive and groaning, her hands strobing at her belly where the demon's infernal energy weapon had punched through her lower abdomen.

Nakitee knelt beside her and set a hand to her sisters back.

"Don't move" she whispered.

Across the clearing she heard an almighty raw of pain. Glancing up she caught site of Vorackus limping backwards, one hand clasped atop his knee from which protruded a jagged white stump of raw bone, the other still clutching his gravity hammer which was thrust out in clear warning. The demon was circling the wounded Chieftain.

Nakitee detached the terrestrial's first aid kit from her combat belt and silently went to work applying the sterile medigel to the Sangheili's wound. Just over the ridge that shadowed them from the clearing she heard another thunderous clash of directed graviton fields against raw energy.

"Stay here" Nakitee whispered, patting the terrestrial on her shoulder. A muted groan was the only reply her sister gave.

Scooping up the terrestrial's fallen storm rifle Nakitee slowly made her way out into the clearing, her mandibles moving in silent prayer to the Forerunners. She emerged into the clearing just in time to see Vorackus stumble backwards, his legs a bloody and ruined mess. The human paused in front of him, sheathing the tip of its sword into the ground as it stooped to pick up the fallen gravity hammer. It inspected the weapon for a brief second before clasping the thick shaft in both hands and bringing it down onto its raised knee with force, smashing the gravity hammer in two.

Vorackus roared in fury and lurched towards the demon, bellowing in pain at the sudden weight forced upon his broken legs even as his hands wrapped around the demons throat.

Nakitee lifted her storm rifle, angling the optical site onto the back of the demons skull.

The human threw aside the broken remains of the hammer as its armoured hands came up to wrest Vorackus prying fingers from his

throat. Nakitee hesitated, recalling the disbelief in her sister's voices as they had reported plasma rounds 'glancing off' the demons shielding. What was the likelihood that she could succeed alone where the massed firepower of an entire combined cohort had failed?

The demon forced away one of Vorackus's hands, his armoured fingers curled around the Jiralhanae's wrist. With a savage downward chop from his other hand he broke the Chieftain's arm. Vorackus howled in pain but did not let up, his other hand remaining firmly gripped around the human warrior's throat.

An idea came to Nakitee. Placing the storm rifle barrel up against the nearest tree she stooped towards the discarded gravity hammer, her gloved claws curling around the end of the shattered shaft that led to the anvil.

Directly in front of her the demon clasped its hand over Vorackus face, the bladed tips of his fingers and thumb digging into the Chieftain's fleshy cheeks and beneath his jointed chin. The hammer was immensely heavy without the anti-gravity generator to offset the still active gravitonic field's emanating from the anvil's core and it took all of Nakitee's raw strength just to lift the hammer.

Vorackus let loose an agonized scream of pain unlike anything the Sangheili female had ever heard before as the demon shoved downwards. Hefting the immense weight of the gravity hammer Nakitee forced the broken shaft up into the air and with a sharp growl of exhaustion brought down the immense weight of the gravity hammer's anvil directly onto the demon's helmeted head.

The blow was a sharp clasp of pressurized air, and the impact force reverberated down Nakitee's arms and into her shoulders and spine. She fell back, the hammer falling to her side as she stuck the ground. Vorackus tumbled backwards, his fingers and limbs twitching spastically as the demon twisted towards her, one hand clasped over its battle helm, the other curling around the hilt of its sword as it swept the blade from the soil and advanced upon her. Nakitee scrambled backwards on her elbows and heels, reaching for the plasma pistol at her waist and knowing she would not reach it in time.

The demon hefted its blade atop its head, and then stumbled, the shimmering sword suddenly slipping from its fingers. The human warrior staggered as if suddenly drunk, mumbled something utterly inaudible to Nakitee's ears and then went slack and fell. The demon hit the snow with a muted thump, its armoured body limp and unmoving.

It was out cold.

Panting for breath Nakitee lay back in the snow, running her long claw like fingers over her combat helm. All was silent for a moment as she looked up at the stars, before she heard the solid crumple and crack of snow and bark beneath hoof.

"This is capture team six" hissed a thick male Sangheili's voice over the internal comm.'s, "Demon sighted. Target is down and appears to be unconscious. We have wounded, request a medical field unit be dispatched immediately along with transport. We have a lot of bodies here."



Nakitee slipped out for a few seconds. When she awoke a Sangheili in the silvery black armour of the Special Operation's Group was kneeling over her. She tried to rise but he forced a hand to her shoulder, there were others around them now.

"Easy warrior" the Sangheili said, "You fought well, now rest. Help is on the way."

## 8. Chapter 6 - The Prisoner

**\*\*Chapter 6 " The Prisoner\*\***

**\*\*Location: Covenant Occupied Human Colony World New Carthage\*\***

**\*\*Date: 03 / 03 / 2545 (Human Military Calendar)\*\***

**\*\*3 Days after the events of Chapter 5\*\***

**\*\*30 Days prior to events of Prologue\*\***

Juha' Relusee was silent as Kilshree was carried out towards the funeral pyre, his hands clasped neatly behind his back as the attendant Unggoy shuffled forwards, the washed and embalmed body of the young warrior supported between them.

More wrapped forms followed in Kilshree's wake, the diminutive slave creatures lifting each body onto the portable pyre's with revered silence. Just over a hundred Sangheili of the Special Operation Group crowded the hastily converted landing platform, each one having come to pay their final respects to one of the warriors who had been killed that dreaded night three standard planetary days passed.

Tasolmee and Texlusee stood beside him, all three Sangheili resplendent in their ceremonial robes and armour. Texlusee's claws were still bandaged and Tasolmee was sombrely quite, his mood understandably subdued.

Relusee's lower mandibles twitched as he did his best to ignore the lancing pain that shot up from his shattered ribs every time he breathed. Healer Sequesha had been furious when she had learned that he had contravened her express ruling as chief medical officer and partaken in the disastrous search and recovery mission. In her anger she had even threatened to have him actively discharged from his unit and strip him of his post and rank. It had taken no small amount of pleading on Relusee's part just for her to agree that he was fit to attend Kilshree's funeral today. In truth he believed she knew that he would have come regardless.

As the attending Unggoy dispersed from the square the young priestess lit each of the funeral pyres in turn, whispering a silent prayer and sprinkling a palm full of intense into each of the open flames.

"\_Lord's above, accept this offering and receive the souls of our departed into your embrace. Keep them blessed and safe beside you, every day until the end of all time, \_\_when we tread our final steps

of the Great Journey and meet again."\_

The priestess folded her claw like hands across her chest and closed her eyes, the Unggoy ranked behind her falling to their knees as they performed prostration before the lighted alters. The female's gesture was repeated by a handful of the more outwardly religious Sangheili around the square. Relusee merely watched as the plasma enhanced flames consumed Kilshree's body, burning away all that he was and all he may have been. Relusee watched as the young fervent warrior he had come to love both as friend and brother evaporated into the air.

"The humans will burn for this" Tasolmee growled beneath his breath, his gloved hands curling to fists by his side, "Every last one of their retched kind!"

Texlusee twisted her head towards him, "The wholesale extermination of their race could never equal Kilshree's loss brother" she remarked coldly, her voice sombre "but when our ships finally glass this world and its infernal inhabitants to molten cinders, it will be a most gratifying start."

\* \* \*

><p>"Relusee, welcome" Korequee said, the tall Sangheili rising from his seat.<p>

Relusee had scarcely set foot over the threshold that separated the corridor from the Commander's personnel quarter's before Korequee was across the room and in front of him. He reached forward and the two Sangheili clasped forearms from hand to elbow, an age old Sangheili gesture of greeting.

"Excellency" Relusee replied, trying to ignore the pain that flared through his ribs as he spoke, "I thank you for your invitation, but fear my delayed absence will only exhaust the remaining good will Healer Sequesha has left for me."

Korequee chuckled beneath his breath, "Do not concern yourself with such matters" he consoled, "I've already informed Sequesha that you are here on my orders to discuss official matters of military concern. Despite her over protectiveness she needs to accept that you are only wounded, not incapacitated."

Relusee nodded his thanks.

Korequee beckoned him forwards towards the vacant chair that was in front of his desk before turning towards one of the antiquated display cabinets that lined the walls of the chamber.

Relusee used the opportunity to take stock of his Commander's quarters.

Several smaller rooms seemed to branch off from the central chamber which likely provided Korequee with a personnel washroom, sleeping quarters and perhaps even a private kitchen and armoury. Space was certainly not at a premium among the senior military officials off the Covenant occupation force. Despite this most of the central chamber remained bare, and Korequee had utilized some of the extra room to install a personnel work station and terminal. The Commander

had always had a reputation on Sepheria Luminare as a Sangheili of adequate wealth but few material luxuries. He had risen to his command upon his skill and frugal devotion to duty rather than the commodity of his lineage.

Korequee turned back towards him, a sea blue crystal bottle in one hand and two small glasses in the other. Placing the two glasses on the table between them Korequee proceeded to pour out two drinks, one he handed to Relusee and the other he took in his own hand before retaking his seat.

"Jiralhanae rum" Korequee explained, "Brewed on Doisac itself. Is has quite a kick but I've found it useful when I've needed to clear my mind."

Relusee sampled the drink, lowering the glass as the blue liquid slipped over his tongue and down his throat. It was remarkably stronger then what he was use too, but at the same time seemed to dull the pain from his broken ribs. He raised the glass to his lower mandibles and took a second sip.

"I'm sorry for your loss Relusee" Korequee said finally, "Kilshree was a fine warrior and his death is a grievous loss not only to your unit but to the entire Special Operation's Group as a whole."

"Thank you Excellency" Korequee replied, "He was an only child, his parents are based on Sangheilios. I've been trying to word a letter to them these last few days, I wanted to tell them he died a warrior's death, but I can't seem to find the right words too..."

He trailed off, unable to finish.

Korequee nodded in agreement, "There'll come Relusee, with time. I've been drafting letters to the families of every warrior that we've lost. Kilshree was not the first, and he will certainly not be the last."

"How many dead?"

Korequee paused, draining his own glass in the moment of silence, "Seven Special Operation warriors, eleven terrestrials, seventeen Unggoy and Kig-yar auxiliaries and a dozen Jiralhanae mercenaries."

"And the demon?" Korequee growled, his claw like hand curling around the now empty glass.

"You know I cannot answer that Relusee" Korequee replied as he folded his hands neatly across the table, "But I promise you, warrior to warrior that justice will be done to Kilshree's killer."

Relusee nodded in solemn agreement.

"Now to the matter at hand" Korequee continued, "How are Tasolmee and Texlusee taking Kilshree's death?"

"He was as a brother to them" Relusee answered, "And they had only just come to accept him as such. They will not let his death go unanswered Excellency, and I fear what will happen if they are given time to brood over the fact that his killer is both alive and at

present inaccessible to them."

"I had feared as much" Korequee said, "Which brings us to our main conundrum. I believe the best course of action would be for you to return to front line duties once fully healed, but at present your unit is combat ineffective. I cannot send your team into a potential combat scenario under strength, and neither can I break up another fourunit to provide you with the seasoned warrior you require."

"Then what would you suggest Excellency?"

Korequee reached beneath his desk and withdrew a holo-file, placing the silver tube on the table between them. Relusee took the metallic cylinder in his hands and flicked open the seal with a single claw, drawing apart the two halves of the tube as the holo-screen materialized between them. He read through the file, taking careful notes of the dates, profile and comments left by the warrior in question's previous commanding officer.

After a few seconds he glanced up towards Korequee.

"A terrestrial?" he asked.

"Conscripted past her initial three cycle term of service" Korequee replied, "She was recommended for advancement to the Special Operation Group during her tour of the Talakreche worlds and noted for her exceptional marks in perception, marksmanship and intuition. She's already completed her basic Special Operation's training and is more battle seasoned then many of our recruits. And by all accounts she may have saved your life Relusee, there's no question of her competence."

Relusee clicked his lower mandibles and cocked his head, considering the Commander's words, "We could condense the remaining training into a high intensity course over a few days. Should she choose to remain within the Special Operation's Group we can tie off any loose ends upon our return to the Academy on Sepheria Luminare. My main concern is whether she wants to join us, she stepped out of this process during her original term of service and legally we cannot force her to join, all Special Operation warriors are volunteers."

"The Terrestrials are here under orders from the Ministry of Resource to back up the Field Legions" Korequee replied, "This is just a transfer from one unit to another Relusee, it will not be permanent unless she wishes it so."

Relusee nodded his head in agreement, his eyes still running over the scroll in his hands.

"Tasolmee may agree with you in principle" he said, "Come to think of it, I believe he's involved with one of the terrestrials in her unit, but I don't know how he'll react to her filling Kilshree's place. As for Texlusee, she won't like it. She hates the terrestrials, she'll never accept this."

"She doesn't have to accept it Relusee" Korequee replied, waving away the remark with a swish of his claws "I know Texlusee well. She may seethe over a terrestrial taking Kilshree's place, but she would never do anything that would place your lives in danger."

Relusee was silent as he skimmed through the holo-scroll a final time, taking careful note of the final report of the commanding officer of the terrestrial in question.

"When do we make our move?" he finally asked.

Korequee mandibles twisted into a smile, "Soon!"

\* \* \*

><p>"Who are you?"<p>

"\_I do not know."\_

Field Master Ortiz' Satoroquee exhaled sharply, his face flushing with anger.

The demon was suspended before him in the centre of the ocular holding chamber, the creature's gauntlet hands secured above its head in shielded manacle guards. Its feet were similarly restrained by a single reinforced rectangular clasp comprised of the same material as a Mgalekgolo's standard issue combat shield. A dozen fully armed and armoured Sangheili ringed the cell, all of them seasoned warriors from the Interstellar Field legions, handpicked by the Field Master himself.

Slowly Satoroquee made his way around the prisoner, the golden zealot's armoured hooves ringing atop the raised platform.

"Why were you sent here?" Satoroquee continued, "Are your forces preparing to attack this world?"

The demon did not turn its helm to face him, "\_I know not of who you speak?"\_

"Insolent vermin!" Satoroquee roared as he rounded on the human from behind "Why are you here?"

"\_I do not know"\_ the demon repeated.

Taia' Korequee watched the interrogation unfold from the observation room that boarded the holding cell, his arms folded across his chest.

"Do you believe that he is telling the truth?" Penance mused.

Beside Korequee Healer Sequesha shook her head, her claw like hands poised atop her hips, "The terrestrial's report stated that she struck a solid blow to the human's upper cranium. Such a blunt force trauma could easily result in memory loss Excellency, both temporary and permanent."

On the other side of the aged San 'Shyuum's bobbing gravity throne Fleet Master Talsharnee and High Priestess Ikarshree regarded the manacled human prisoner with silent contemplation.

"Then it could be telling truth?" Talsharnee finally remarked.

Sequesha reached up to scratch at her lower mandibles then sighed, "Excellency, the terrestrial's report stated that she struck this human directly atop its head with the full force of the hammer's anvil, swathed in gravitonic fields and without a functioning gravity inhibitor. That amount of raw force could have crushed a Mgalekgolo's skull into its torso compartment. Once I've worked out how this human is still alive, I'll start looking into whether it's suffering from amnesia."

"What can you tell us about its physiology?" Ikarshree asked, "Could it be one of the human's genetically modified warriors? I believe they refer to them as, Spartans."

Ikarshree spoke the word with evident distaste; her words seeming to curl around the term with an almost wary disgust.

"The human's armour has deflected all attempts to scan or examine his anatomy" Sequesha replied shaking her head, "But I do not believe so. I know a little of the human's enhanced warrior's from autopsy reports and reported interrogations. Their Spartan combat troops are merely drug enhanced genetically augmented heavy infantry, this is something else. The psychical strength it displayed, its sheer size and stamina in relation to a standard adult human makes me believe that it has been genetically engineered from conception rather than just enhanced. This, creature has not consumed food or water for three standard human days and we do not know when it last consumed adequate provisions. It shouldn't even be conscious at this moment."

Penance nodded in reply, tapping his chin with a gnarled finger "Why do we not merely strip off its armour and examine the flesh beneath?"

"I have not been able to decipher any form of seal or manual access to remove any part of its armour from the outside" Sequesha replied, "As best I can tell it was designed only to be opened from the inside. We could always try to force our way in but I believe the human is physically integrated into the armour to such a degree that such an action may well kill him."

"Wouldn't that be unfortunate?" Talsharnee remarked coldly.

"The demon will be terminated in due course Fleet Master" Penance assured them with a lazy wave of his wrist "but first we have to know who sent it and why. The humans are not the only suspect party. The Phfor, the Xenotine's or even a faction within the High Council could be responsible for this, abomination."

"The High Council" Talsharnee sneered, "Using humans, preposterous."

"The prospect is not entirely without precedent" Ikarshree remarked, her eyes still upon the demon, "A single captured human or even a small number of them would be easy enough to procure on the galactic black market for one with adequate wealth and resources. Indoctrination would be a simple enough matter, and as the good Healer has already pointed out, the demon's armour has been designed to be seemingly impossible to force open without killing the occupant. It was obviously designed for a suicide mission, the perfect deniable asset."

"A reasonable assessment" Penance nodded, "Commander, what do we know of this human's weaponry?"

"Precious little" Korequee replied as he stretched out his neck muscles, "We've identified a varied range of what appears to be standard issue infantry equipment, an assault rifle and combat blade, some form of energy grenades. They appear to be comprised of same type of material as the human's battle armour and as such are completely impervious to any of our scanners. Furthermore all the weapons appear to be gene locked to the human's own genetic imprint, so we cannot test their capabilities although from the combat reports they appear to be energy based."

"Interesting" Penance pondered, stroking at the thin whiskers beneath his chin as he considered Korequee's words, "The humans do not possess that level of technology, which would suggest we are dealing with either a domestic or neighbouring party. Tell me Commander, what would be your best educated guess?"

"Excellency, the human's armour and weapons bear marking not common to any known power or private organization that I know of" Korequee said, "This human was not equipped by any force or party within the Orion spiral arm."

Penance nodded his head in silent agreement, raising a withered hand to ward off any further comments, "Most disconcerting. Yet perhaps the demon can shed some light as to the mystery of its origins."

He gestured towards the interrogation room where Satoroquee was now directly in front of the shackled human, his deep voice echoing throughout the circular chamber.

"...equipped you?" Satoroquee was asking.

The demon regarded the Field Master with an almost quizzical inclination of its helmet head.

"Who provided your weapons and armour?" Satoroquee repeated through gritted mandibles.

"\_The state\_" the demon replied.

"Which state?"

"\_I cannot remember."\_

"Blasted creature" Satoroquee roared, raising his arm as if to strike the human. To its credit the demon didn't even flinch. At the last moment Satoroquee paused, though better of his action and lowered his arm. Without a further word the golden armoured Field Master turned on his heel and swept his hand over the access crystal beside the chamber's single doorway. The energy field that blocked the doorway dissipated and Satoroquee strode out.

"Well that was distinctly unhelpful" Ikarshree commented beneath her breathe.

"Quite" Penance agreed, "Healer, what can you tell me about Chieftain Vorackus's current condition."

Beside Korequee Sequesha took a cursory step back and rubbed absently at her wrist, "Terminal, if such a term could be applied to his condition. The Jiralhanae is alive in a technical sense; though I do not believe he will ever regain consciousness. The demon shattered both off his legs from kneecap to hip, and all but crushed the femur in his forearm into broken gravel before dislocating Vorackus's upper nasal cavity. He then took the Chieftain's broken nose and effectively shoved it up into his brain. The damage was extreme, all I can do is to try and make him comfortable."

"Thank you Healer" Penance replied solemnly. They were all silent for a moment, Korequee using the time to mutter a voiceless prayer for Vorackus's soul. He was a Jiralhanae, a turncoat and perhaps even butcher of countless Sangheili, but his actions whether intentional or not had saved Relusee's life and traitor or not, he had met his end with courage and honour, yet robbed of his final dignity by the human before them.

After a few seconds the door to the observation room slid open and Satoroquee entered, the big Sangheili's mood was little improved.

"Infuriating race" he growled, clasping his claw like hands behind his back, "Excellency, I see little more that can be garnered from this prisoner, and I am concerned over the threat he could pose to the security of this instillation and its personnel."

"I agree with the Field Master" Ikarshree responded, "This demon poses a direct threat to all of our interests that we have invested into this world. It should be moved off planet immediately."

She made no mention of the Forerunner relics in Satoroquee's or Sequesha's presence.

Penance sighed, drumming his long fingers on the armrest of his throne, "I'll make the necessary arrangements. Once we've garnered everything we can, the human will be relocated to a secure facility off world for further interrogation and eventual termination."

"Excellency" Korequee said as he turned towards the Prophet, "I would ask you to allow that my own Special Operation warriors handle the transfer of the prisoner from surface to orbit. I do not wish to give this human any possible chance of being loosed upon the surface of this world for a second time."

"Off course Commander" Penance agreed with a casual wave of his hand, "You'll handle the transfer personally."

"A most satisfying outcome Excellency" Satoroquee remarked, a hint of shallow triumph in his voice, "I take it there will be suitable repercussions taken against the human colonists for the loss of our warriors."

"Absolutely not" Ikarshree suddenly interjected. From the tone of her voice Korequee knew that the High Priestess would broker no argument on this subject.

Satoroquee turned towards her, his lower mandibles twisting in anger,



"We have lost warriors to the humans priestess. They must be punished for their insolence."

"The human resistance cells maintain planet wide communication with each other Field Master" Ikarshree growled as she turned towards him, "They know of every raid, bombing and foray committed against our forces before we've even rounded up the hostages for retaliation. Right now our subjugation of this world and the flow of raw materials from it depend on the humans belief that we maintain complete military superiority over their indigenous resistance forces. If the humans learn that a single of their warrior's killed so many of ours, it could be seen as a rallying cry to war, at worst we could see a planet wide uprising. The flow of supplies to the frontlines would be strangled if not cut off entirely, and our overall crusade against the humans would suffer because of it. The colonists are never going to know what happened here Field Master."

Satoroquee still clearly boiling with anger parted his mandibles to speak but Penance cut him off before we could respond.

"In this matter Field Master" Penance said, "I fear the High Priestess is correct in that a retaliatory action against the humans could do more harm than good. The end results will be the same, any humans who survive this occupation will die when we glass this..."

Penance paused, his voice trailing off as something caught the aged San 'Shyuum's attention. Inside the holding chamber the Sangheili Legionnaire's were moving towards the single entrance, their weapons raised, the section leader blocking the doorway. Someone was trying to force their way inside.

Korequee swept his hand over the terminal that linked beneath the observation window, a holo-panel lighting up beneath his gauntlet as he amplified the transceivers volume. Inside the chamber he caught sight of a swarthy Jiralhanae clad in the pseudo combat harness of a captain, ultra class. A handful of the creature's fellow mercenaries filled the corridor behind him.

"I do not care who you believe yourself to be Krausx" the Sangheili section leader was growling, "The Field Master ordered that no one is to be permitted entry to this cell."

"\_...shishvalk \_butchered our kin Sangheili" Krausx was shouting, "Not to mention your own. We are here to interrogate the prisoner, your Field Master is fully aware of our orders."

"Sacred flame I am" Satoroquee roared, reaching for his communicator at his wrist, "I'll have that beast's head for this."

Penance suddenly reached up and grasped the Sangheili thick wrist in his wiry fingers, "Hold fast Field Master" he said, "Just for the moment."

"...am not going to ask you again" the section leader hissed, his fellow Legionnaires levelling their rifles and carbines behind him, "Step back from the doorway!"

Krausx stood his ground, his arms folded. His fellow Jiralhanae tensed behind him.

"Let them enter" Penance decided.

"Excellency!" Satoroquee cried, "You cannot be..."

"I'm curious Field Master" Penance mused, his eyes returning to the demon, "Krausx was a counter-insurgency officer on Doisac during the tribal secessions, perhaps he can glean something from our prisoner that you were unable to."

"Excellency I strongly..." Korequee began.

"Silence" Penance hissed, "You will do as ordered Sangheili!"

Satoroquee glanced towards Korequee, and with a nod of his head thumbed the communicator at his wrist, "It's alright Ikorandee, they have clearance. Stand down and vacate the chamber immediately, the prisoner is to be left in their care."

With evident reluctance the section leader turned and barked a command to his assembled warriors. One by one the Sangheili filed out of the cell as the Jiralhanae entered, the swarthy irregulars spreading out around the prisoner as the last legionnaire sealed the doorway behind her.

"Now human" Krausx growled, his arms folded before him, "It is time you leant your place beneath us."

The demon visibly straitened before him, the slanted sheath like blades that extended from the rear edge of its forearm's seeming to twist ever so slightly as if it was testing the manacles that ensnared its gauntlets. From the observation room Korequee felt a distinctly unpleasant chill trickling down his spine as he watched the demon's beast like helm tilt towards Krausx and was suddenly reminded of a Sangheilian razorback trekking its prey.

"\_You are \_\_Jiralhanae?"\_ the prisoner stated, "\_I fought your kind in the forest."\_

"You murdered our kin" one of the Jiralhanae mercenaries hissed.

The demon twisted its helm over its shoulder, the manacles audibly flexing above it head\_, "I inflicted upon them the same fate that they attempted to inflict upon myself"\_ he replied coldly, "\_I merely succeeded where they failed."\_

"You dare to mock our dead" Krausx shouted.

The demon turned back towards him and cocked its head as it regarded the captain, "\_Their discipline was poor."\_

"What?" one of the Jiralhanae growled.

"\_Your fellow Jiralhanae"\_ the demon remarked, his eyes still upon Krausx, "\_they were poorly disciplined and inexperienced combatants. Your commander was different, capable but overconfident in his own abilities. I'm sure he held nothing but contempt for the fighting ability of those beneath him."\_

"Silence demon!" Krausx shouted, "We are sacred warriors of Covenant and you will hold your tongue!"

From behind the observation screen Korequee exhaled deeply, his hand moving towards the deactivated plasma sword at his waist. Inside the chamber the demon was tensing its muscles, audibly flexing the manacles above.

"\_You are not a front line unit are you?"\_ the prisoner asked.

Krausx opened his mouth to speak then stopped, his meaty paws clenching to fists as he looked around his fellow warriors.

"\_Yes"\_ the demon continued, "\_The pieces begin to assume their place. This is an occupied world, a beachhead in your enemy's territory. A place to marshal supplies, resources and you are rear echelon, security troops."\_

"Silence human" Krausx growled.

"\_It's is no wonder really"\_ the demon continued, its voice now laced with obvious contempt; "\_You have never experienced the horror of true and total war have you? No sane military commander would risk your incompetence on the battlefield, the only place you could be ever be tolerated in a war is here."\_

"Silence" Krausx roared, pulling his arm back to strike a blow across the human's face. As before and to Korequee's grudging respect the demon didn't even flinch.

At the last moment Krausx paused, glancing towards his fellow warriors. The Jiralhanae milled about, avoiding each others eyes with an almost sheepish reluctance where before there had only been confidence.

Lowering his arm Krausx took a step back from the prisoner, his attention flickering towards the observation panel. With a somewhat uncharacteristic chuckle he began to laugh.

Korequee clicked his lower mandibles in puzzlement. Penance was silent beside him whilst Satoroque fumed in the corner.

"You are correct human" Krausx chortled as he lifted a curled hand to his mouth, "To each warrior their respected duties. It is the will of the God's we find ourselves on this world, with you in our care."

"\_How unfortunate for us both"\_ the demon retorted.

Krausx grinned a toothy smile, "I think it is time we see your face demon" Krausx remarked, "I wish to look upon your eyes before I tear them out."

"\_I welcome you to try beast."\_

"Excellency" Korequee warned.

"If they..." Sequesha began.

"We will stop them before they extract flesh" Penance said, "But I am curious to see what lies beneath the demon's visor."

Inside the chamber Krausx cracked his fingers, "Lepidus, remove the human's helmet."

A thickly built Jiralhanae emerged from pack, rounding the cell until he stood beside his captain. The swarthy warrior reached forward and grasped the human's armoured head in both hands, hooking his thick fingers around the beastmask's lower cranium and chin guard. The demon was silent and stubbornly impassive as the Jiralhanae tried to twist its head first one way, and then the other, gaining only a fraction of movement in either direction despite his best attempts.

"There is no dermal seal or outer layer" Lepidus grunted, his brow clenched in exertion, "I cannot feel a release mechanism."

The Jiralhanae stepped forward, his hands still locked around the prisoner's head.

Korequee glanced down towards Penance. The aged San' Shyuum was poised at the edge of his gravity throne, the knobbly nails of his fingers digging into the underside of the throne's armrest.

"Magalus, Bruktus" Krausx gestured to the two Jiralhanae warriors, "Take hold of the human's..."

The demon lashed out suddenly and with a force that Korequee had not truly believed the creature capable of before, its skull helm crashing straight into Lepidus's face. There was the screech of cable as the manacles above the demon were strained to their limit, but held.

Lepidus pitched backwards drunkenly on his heels, the Jiralhanae's face a twisted mess of bloodied fur, exposed bone and cartilage. Krausx was already reeling as Lepidus hit the ground, his limbs twitching spastically as blood gurgled from his lips. From the angle he was laid out Korequee knew instantly that his neck was broken.

Inside the observation room the Sangheili recoiled from the scene. Fleet Master Talsharnee was cursing the Jiralhanae's stupidity and ordering them removed even as Satoroque was roaring into the communicator at his wrist.

The Sangheili legionnaire's stormed back into the room, corralling the Jiralhanae mercenaries first from the chamber's perimeter and then towards the doorway, the contractors screaming all manner of threats and profanities. Lepidus's body was unceremoniously scooped from the ground and hoisted into the midst of his companions before the Jiralhanae were bundled out of the chamber altogether.

\* \* \*

><p>Nu Carthage was not a world any self respecting Sangheili would ever choose to colonize willingly.<p>

As a race the Sangheili had evolved in a climate of tropical heat and

fertile coastland. By comparison the human colony was a barren half frozen backwater of a world; its sole commodity being the extensive deposits of raw materials entrenched beneath its surface. Under normal circumstances the Sangheili would have been all too happy to leave the planet to penal labour and Kig-yar merchants, creaming off the income derived from any exports and subsequent industry from the comfort of their own warm homeworlds.

Yet the ongoing crusade against the humans required no small amount of sacrifice from the Sangheili, the luxury of home comforts chief amongst them.

Suka' Nakitee was therefore understandably gratified to have access to the legionary communal sauna block that day. The complex was one of only six such structures within the Covenant Forward Operating Base that spread out from the Central Spire, and as such admittance was in very high demand.

Naked save for a silken loin cloth and towel, Nakitee made her way towards the closest sauna room and opened the door. A single female Sangheili of slightly darker skin tone was already seated on the first rack, a field legionnaire if the tattoo on her shoulder was anything to go by. The female greeted Nakitee with a cordial nod of her head but otherwise remained silent. Nodding her head in acknowledgement Nakitee ascended up the steps to the second rack and sat down. The raw heat that seeped through her back, thighs and hooves was a pleasant and welcome relief to the Sangheili. Nakitee lent back her head and closed her eyes as for the first time in she could not remember how many days, sweat dripped freely down from her forehead, shoulders and arms.

The field legionnaire left not long after she arrived. Nakitee heard her stand up and make her way out of the sauna, easing the glass door shut behind her. There was the gentle thump of her bare hooves on the marble floor, and then the sound of running water, a shower being activated.

Nakitee allowed herself to drift into the all consuming heat, her mind free to wander. She was home again, standing barehoofed in a field of freshly cut Ikuren, her family's ancestral villa back on Sepheria Luminare. There was no war here, no military checkpoints, no frigid wasteland and no blasted humans.

A child's cry echoed behind her, Nakitee turned to see her sibling brothers playfully rolling around together in the mud, the harried looking Unggoy housemaid screaming at them to stop before her mother saw them.

Nakitee lifted a cupped hand to her mandibles as she laughed, the light breeze gently tingling the skin of her cheekbone along with the summer crop.

All was fair until an ice like claw stroked her spine from behind, chilling the Sangheili warrior to her core. Nakitee awoke to the sensation of icicle like fingers closing about her throat, stifling the air from her lungs. She jolted up from her seat and gasped for air, the towel falling from her body.

Nakitee almost slipped as her heel touched the floor. Her skin was plastered with thick clammy sweat which dripped from her legs, brow

and even the tips of her claws.

How long had she been asleep for?

Scooping her towel from the floor Nakitee strode straight towards the glass door, storming out of the sauna as fast as she was able. There was no sound of running water, no gentle click of hooves along the marble floor.

Nakitee found the communal showers deserted, the field legionnaire must have left.

Discarding her sweatlogged towel and loincloth Nakitee stepped into the shower block and swiped her claw like hand over the activation rune. The cold water that rinsed over her was an unexpected yet welcome relief from the sudden heat and Nakitee ensured that it reached every corner of body as she smoothed her hands over her scalp.

After a few minutes Nakitee swept her hand back over the activation rune, and the jet above her ceased, the last droplets of water bouncing off her neck and shoulders before plummeting to the floor beneath her. It was as that gentle patter of water droplets petered out that Nakitee was suddenly made aware of another sound coming somewhere close by, a gentle click against the marble floor.

Hoofbeats.

Stepping out from the communal showers Nakitee made her way towards the corridor that ran down the centre of the centre of the shower block.

There was nothing.

Clicking her lower mandibles Nakitee turned towards the stairs that led down from the main changing area below the gymnasium.

Again there was no one there.

Was she imagining things now?

Nakitee shook her head, letting slip an exasperated sigh. Her nerves had not seemed this frayed even during her tour of the Talakreche worlds, and the Jiralhanae were not exactly the most jovial of subjects.

Twisting on her heel Nakitee made her way towards the chamber's sole washbasin. She splashed cold water over her face and rubbed at her eyes.

She was just tired.

Opening her eyes Nakitee placed both hands on the basin's edge and looked up into the reflective mirror above the sink, vaguely glimpsing the coiling stream rising from the shower block behind her.

She knew she had not slept well these last three days, not since...

The steam was moving the wrong way!

Pure instinct took over her actions. Nakitee ducked down, twisting her body towards the ground as the mirror shattered above her head.

The blow had no doubt been meant for her skull.

Pivoting on one heel Nakitee struck out with her other leg, sweeping the seemingly empty space before her with a powerful overhead kick. Her barehoof connected with something undeniably solid and in the vacant steam choked shower block Nakitee caught site of the faintest outline of a Sangheili warrior, high in stature and armoured.

Ossoona.

They'd come for her!

Nakitee's blow was a textbook military close quarters strike, yet her opponent had the advantage of a fully sealed combat harness, and she was stark naked. Pain flared through her lower thigh and hip joint yet her attacker, still half invisible was momentarily reeling away from her.

Grimacing against the pain Nakitee clasped her hands above her head and locked her fists together.

Something crashed into her from the side and all but through the Sangheili from her hooves. In the ensuing struggle against the second invisible opponent Nakitee felt a powerful arm hook around her throat as she was pulled backwards, the chokehold crushing her windpipe.

Sputtering for breath Nakitee smashed her elbow into her attacker's abdomen. There was a guttural hiss in her ear and the faintest notion of breath on the back of her neck but the arm locked around her throat remained just as tight as it had been before. In front of her Nakitee glimpsed definite movement as the first attacker's active camouflage fought to reassume its master's shape.

Nakitee changed tact. Gasping in her last lungful of air Nakitee pivoted forwards, leaning her full weight onto the tips of her hooves. For the slightest moment the second attacker at her rear was lifted from the ground, their full weight now supported on Nakitee's back.

Breathing out Nakitee launched herself backwards with all the force she could muster. The two Sangheili crashed into the wall with such force that the luminous panelling audibly flexed behind them. Her attacker staggered, their arm loosening from her throat. Nakitee struck out with her elbow landing a second strike to the cloaked Sangheili's chestplate.

Freed of her attackers grasp, Nakitee sprinted for the steps that led down from the gymnasium's dressing chamber. There was a plasma pistol and blade in her locker, if she could just reach them...

A cloaked leg connected with her lower thigh, cracking against her

kneecap. Nakitee almost screamed as she was flipped forward onto the cold marble floor. She landed on her hands and knees and was just making a less than articulate attempt to right herself when two gloved hands seized her arms from behind.

Nakitee hissed vehemently as she was pulled to her knees, an armoured hoof forcing its way down onto the back of her shin and pinning her legs to the ground. In front of her two Sangheili materialized from the swarming clouds of steam. Her first attacker was a thickly built male; the second was a tall lithely built female.

Nakitee turned up her mandibles at the Ossoona, trying her best to rise to her feet but the hoof pinning her lower legs to the ground was too strong, and her own strength was deserting her. Stifling a cough Nakitee was suddenly aware of a black hood being pulled over her head. She struggled, jabbing her elbow into the third Ossoona's back.

A sharp sudden crack to the back of her skull felled the female to the ground.

\* \* \*

><p>"She's awake Commander."<p>

Nakitee winced as the hood was pulled free from her head, the sudden illumination stinging her eyes as she ducked her head.

Her mouth was dry.

How long had she been unconscious for?

The room she was in was windowless, its walls a plain ablative black whilst a single strip of lighting directly above her provided the featureless chamber with its only source of light. It took Nakitee a few seconds to register the Sangheili seated in front of her.

From his frame and posture Nakitee knew he was male, yet he was swathed in shadows, just outside of her narrow field of vision. He was armoured, yet Nakitee could not make out any formal indication of rank or unit insignia.

Nakitee could sense others in the room, at least two behind her. That was where the voice had come from.

Clearly the Sangheili before her was the 'Commander' of which they spoke.

"Suka' Nakitee?" the Sangheili asked. His accent denoted a warrior of high lineage, yet the tone was of one seasoned by combat. The Commander gestured with his claws to indicate to her that it was a question.

Tersely Nakitee nodded her head.

"\_First Daughter of Varo and Essa Nakitee" he continued, "Good lineage, if somewhat of a common ancestry."

There was an evident disdain in his voice now.



"I understand you're here with your cohort under a mandatory order of extended service by order of the Ministry of Resources. Your standard term was spent on deployment in the Talakreche sector, correct?"

"Yes" Nakitee replied.

The Commander nodded in solemn acknowledgement, "You were recommended for advancement into the Special Operation's Group, had all but completed your standard training in fact, and then for reasons never specified you dropped out."

"Yes" Nakitee repeated, "As was my right by common law."

The Commander shifted in his seat, resting his lower mandibles between his claw like thumb and forefinger. Nakitee was repeating his words in her head, trying to decide if they had been phrased as a question when he spoke.

"How long have you been working for the humans?"

"What?" Nakitee gasped, her face twisting in horror at the insinuation. She was flabbergasted.

"How long have you been in contact with the human central military command?" the Sangheili male asked.

"I..." Nakitee began as she shook her head, "I don't know what..."

This couldn't be happening!

"A very interesting report" the commander said as he held up a sealed silver holo-scroll, "Your's from three standard human days ago, I assume you're more than familiar with their dating system, as you are likely in frequent contact with them."

"I'm not a traitor" Nakitee hissed, "I'm here under orders. I can barely even speak their language."

Someone was chuckling behind her, a female. Nakitee was sure of it.

"Are yes, conscripted deployment" the Commander remarked, "the perfect cover for a defector. Strange that out of every terrestrial on this world you just happen to turn up where and when a human commando is scheduled to make planetfall."

"I helped subdue him" Nakitee retorted, "If I was working with the humans why would I help capture their infiltrator."

"Yes that was quite a conundrum for me as well" the Sangheili male replied as he opened the data-scroll, "that was until I went back and read through your earlier reports. I tell you now Nakitee I've been in fleet security fifteen cycles but it's not often I'm fed a sacrificial agent."

Nakitee opened her mandibles to speak but no words came out. She paused, her face twisting into a look of pure uncomprehending confusion.

"Your third patrol" the Sangheili continued. "Your report states that you stopped and search a human youngling, male. Nothing found, you let it go. Nine standard planetary days later one of our supply convoy's following a supposedly random route is ambushed by human insurgents."

"I was there" Nakitee snapped, "I killed one of the humans with my bare hands. This is..."

"One planetary day later" the Commander cut in "During the reprisal executions in the city square your report states that you intercepted a lone human child attempting to vault the security barrier. Then during your report concerning the engagement with the human commando you record seeing a human child fleeing from the forest, only then do you acknowledge that the child encountered at all three occasions was the same human. The human who has been serving as your contact with their indigenous resistance force, the human you failed to execute after it attempted to breach an active security zone, and the same human you escorted from an enemy drop zone while our forces were committed to hunting down a pre-arranged decoy!"

"I'm not working with the humans" Nakitee all but screamed, "This is utterly preposterous."

The Sangheili rose from his seat, his hand reaching for a sheathed energy sword at his waist as he loomed over Nakitee.

"Let me simplify this for you little daughter" he growled, "What you've done is punishable by ritual excruciation and execution. We have irrefutable evidence linking you to the human resistance forces here; however my superiors would like to make you an offer. You come from a well respected family Nakitee, and those who have benefited from their friendship do not wish to be associated with such scandal. If you admit your guilt, I can promise you a type of later day exile. You'll never serve in the military again, you will never be considered fit for bonding by any respectable lineage, but you will be allowed to return home. You can even take up your position with the Central Archives and Account's. If however you continue to profess your innocence, we will have no other option but to punish you're crimes to the full extent of both military and state law. You will be hung, drawn and quartered, your name will be stricken from all honours and your parents and brothers will be forbidden on pain of death from ever breeding again!"

Nakitee glared at the shadowy male, her eyes screaming undisguised murder. In truth she was terrified, it was worse than anything she had feared would come from her report, but she had told the truth on all accounts, and she would tell it now.

"My grandfather always commanded me to tell the truth" Nakitee remarked calmly, "Even if one day it would lead to my death. I am no traitor nor have I ever been in contact with any human organization or individual except on account of mutual apathy. Do with me what you will."

She closed her eyes, a single tear slipping down her cheek. She could only hope her parents would forgive her.

Silence seemed to reign between them for eternity, and Nakitee was

aware that her twin hearts were thumping ever harder inside her chest. She'd never believed her life would end like this.

"Finally put warrior."

The male's voice was soft, almost paternal in its sudden change of tone. Nakitee inhaled deeply as she felt a strong claw like hand curl around her shoulder as she opened her eyes.

The Sangheili Commander was directly in front of her, his mandibles twisted into a kindly smile before he looked up over her head.

"Release her Tasolmee."

Nakitee felt the bonds around her wrists loosen before sliding free from her hands altogether.

Tenuously she rose from her seat, absently stroking at her claws together, "I don't understand?"

The Sangheili male, a Special Operation's Commander Nakitee now realized clasped his hands behind his back, "Nakitee, my name is Commander Taia' Korequee, of the Special Operation's Group. I'm afraid I owe you a most sincere apology warrior, for both your treatment in being brought here and for the subsequent terror I must have no doubt just put you through. Though you did give two of my most experienced warrior's a most remarkable thrashing all things considered."

With a slight inclination of his head Korequee gestured towards the rear of the room, Nakitee turned in the direction he had indicated. Two Sangheili warriors stood directly behind her seat, a male and female both clad in the silvery combat harnesses of the Special Operation's Group. A third Sangheili male of identical cladding was seated in the corner of the room, one arm slung in a medical brace that wrapped around his shoulder.

"For a terrestrial" the female remarked dryly.

"What was that Texlusee?" Korequee asked.

"I said you wanted her unharmed" Texlusee replied, "Our choices were limited."

"Next time our hands will not be tied" the male that had to be Tasolmee remarked. The Sangheili male looked familiar and Nakitee was certain she's laid eyes on him around her barracks before, but she could not think where or when.

Slowly Nakitee turned back towards Korequee, "My report?" she asked.

Korequee held up the silver tube in his claw like fingers, "As I said, a most interesting read. And as a former intelligence officer, I can tell you on all accounts of your conduct since setting foot on this world you have made the right decision. Killing the human youngling after the search would have served no practical purpose, whilst murdering it at the executions with thousands of its kin all around could have incensed the humans to riot. As for the drop site,

I confess its presence there is still a complete mystery to me."

"Do you believe it to be a contact for the human resistance?" she asked.

"It's possible" Korequee conceded with a twist of his neck, "But unlikely. The human infiltrator came down close to the mass burial site which was used at the executions you intercepted the child at. His very presence at both locations would lead me to believe he knew one of the prisoners we had taken. More than likely the child was paying its final respects and was simply at the wrong place at the wrong time."

"A pity we cannot extract the answers from him first hand" Tasolmee remarked from behind.

"Quite true" Korequee replied, "However by your report he is still alive and whilst he is likely not directly involved with whatever mission this human infiltrator was sent to accomplish, he was the first witness to its arrival and thus may have valuable intelligence. He is now a first priority target. Nakitee, having crossed paths with him before I am confident you can assist us in identifying and apprehending this child, he must be taken alive."

"But, I'm a terrestrial" Nakitee replied, "I'm not part of the Special Operation's Group."

Korequee's mandibles curled back into a smile, "I apologized to you before Nakitee and now I must do so again. Legionnaire Suka' Nakitee, by the authority of my position and the Covenant Ground Forces, I am placing you under the jurisdiction of the Special Operation's Group. On refreshment of your basic training you will be placed under the command of squad leader Juha' Relusee. Suka' Nakitee, welcome to silverbacks."

"Oh" Nakitee replied.

\* \* \*

><p>It had been three days since Alex had returned from the forest.<p>

Three days since his encounter with the mysterious warrior atop Alam's grave. Three days since the young boy had slipped back into the orphanage unnoticed in the dead of night.

He had not left its walls since.

Alex lay awake beneath his piled blankets, the tattered mattress squeaking ever so slightly as he stretched out his tense limbs, his eyes remaining fixated on the antiquated watch on his wrist, the second hand ticking by.

He had barely slept at all.

Alex had remembered so vividly scrambling down the abandoned coal shoot that night, his clothing damp with grime and sleet. He had curled up in the storeroom's corner and sobbed over what he had seen, the rich scent of the mutilated brutes still hot inside his mouth and nostrils. If his waking hours were not consumed with the terror of

what he had witnessed, then his dreams were filled with the horrors that could yet be unleashed against him.

The seconds ticked by before him. Minutes passed, and then hours yet nothing came for Alex from the darkness. The other orphans crammed into the small basement continued in their slumber oblivious to his plight. There was gentle snoring of to his right, and somewhere in the room Alex could hear a child coughing wetly. Above them Alex could hear the light tread of footsteps as the adults moved around in the rooms of the orphanage above. There were hushed whispers and he thought he could hear Ms Potter crying in the dining hall.

She always cried.

There was movement outside the orphanage too, a soft drone like that of a hummingbird.

A Covenant hovercraft!

Alex stirred restlessly, easing up the blanket from over his head. Covenant vehicles passed the orphanage all the time, especially at night when the Covenant patrols were sweeping the city for any humans who were in violation of their planet wide curfew.

Alex closed his eyes, his numb lips curling downwards as he struggled to control his breathing.

Were those footsteps in the road above?

There was a commotion now in the central hallways of the orphanage, frightened voices and then screams. Something crashed to the ground, further screams coupled with course alien hisses and the sudden \_whoosh\_ of plasma fire.

The orphans stirred around him, the children rising from their gurneys to exchange nervous panicked glances.

The double wooden doors to the basement were smashed aside, bathing the basement in piecing white light. The figure that towered in the doorway stood over eight feet in height and was clad in a sinister crimson battledress, its muscular form blocking a passage that could easily have fitted two adult humans abreast.

The alien was not alone, and as she strode into the basement Alex caught the silhouette of others behind her, cobalt armour, fanged maws and sharpened claws.

The Covenant elite's swarmed into the room in mass, their viciously angular plasma rifles pointed downwards as they swept the human orphans before them, physically wrenching the handful of children who remained beneath their covers into the air. Alex had barely scrambled out from his bed when a towering female clad in blue armour emerged from the ranks of elites and descended upon him, clasping his shoulder in an inhuman claw.

Alex glanced up towards her helm, and in that shock moment knew that they had met before. Almost four weeks ago, she had searched him in an distant alleyway. The Covenant soldiers had butchered the others humans in front of him, but she had let him go. Then again a week later an elite had stopped him just as he'd attempted to charge out

onto the execution square where Alam had been shot.

It had been her again, and again she'd let him go.

And then three nights ago in the forest, as he'd been fleeing back towards the city. The Covenant soldiers had been so close to him that night. Alex remembered with terror catching his foot in the branch and almost breaking his ankle. It had been as he had twisted around to free his foot that he had caught sight of the elites not a hundred paces behind him. One had been looking directly at him, the same elite who had stopped him from running out onto the square, the same elite who had searched him in the alleyway all those weeks ago.

Alex opened his eyes, his lips parting in a strangled cry as he flew up from his bed.

The basement was quite, the orphans still peacefully slumbering around him.

As if on queue the Covenant hovercraft parked in the road above increased in drone as it pulled off, its gentle murmur receding into the silence of the night.

Alex rubbed at his temples with his forearm, his pyjama sleeve coming away slick with sweat.

The female elite had seen him running from the forest.

And she had recognized him!

End  
file.